

Harry Potter and The Well of Shadows

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1. The Last Days of Summer

There were many things about Harry Potter that made him something of an unusual boy. His eyes were a remarkable and bright green, inherited from his mother, capable of wide ranges and depths of emotion. His raven black hair was so wild and unruly that even magic could not tame it. Literally, since Harry was also a wizard and an exceptional one at that.

But perhaps the most unusual thing about Harry right now was the fact that, if you ignored his uncle's attempt to kill him, Harry was actually enjoying his summer holiday.

And this, where Harry was concerned, was unusual.

Normally Harry hated his summers with a passion and dreaded their coming. The reasons for this were many and varied, changing over the years. Most recently Harry's dislike of the summer months stemmed from his separation from his friends and the people he considered family. When it came to his real 'family' --his uncle Vernon, aunt Petunia and cousin Dudley-- Harry actually preferred to be separated from them, hopefully by a great distance.

The reasons for Harry's unusual enjoyment of this summer, the one between his fifth and sixth-years at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, was twofold.

Firstly, he was not spending his holiday in the terrible presence of the Dursleys, but was rather safely ensconced in the comforting and loving environment of the Burrow and surrounded by the people he considered to be his true family, the Weasleys.

The second reason that Harry was enjoying his summer, was currently lying beside him in the bed with her head gently resting on his chest and one arm thrown over his waist.

Harry smiled serenely as his fingers traced abstract patterns on the warm skin of Ginny's bare shoulder. The sun had begun to rise into the morning sky and rays of soft sunshine beamed through the windows, suffusing the bedroom with a golden glow. Continuing to stroke his hand up and down Ginny's arm Harry thought back over the summer, undoubtedly the best summer of his life, and how he came to be sharing a bed with such a lovely young woman.

To say the circumstances were unusual would be an understatement.

If nothing else they were at the very least interesting.

Harry's smile took on a wry aspect as he recalled how his summer had literally started off with a loud bang. Three of them, actually, and all very loud. His fingers paused in their feather-light caress of Ginny's arm as he remembered the sharp pain when Uncle Vernon had shot him in the chest.

Harry had had his brushes with death before, enough so that he and the Grim Reaper were almost on a first name basis, but this time it had been a particularly close call. If it had not been for Ginny, who now slumbered peacefully in his arms, Harry would likely have not survived the experience.

Still, several good things had come from it, not least of which was Harry finally being able to complete his Animagus transformation. The complete and utter destruction of Privet Drive was a bonus as well, not to mention that Harry got to spend the remainder of the summer at the Burrow with the Weasleys.

After waking up from his ordeal, lying underneath a very underdressed Ginny, things had almost returned for what passed as normal in the Weasley household. Granted it had taken a great deal of explaining on both Harry and Ginny's part to convince Mrs Weasley that Ginny had to be naked in order to establish the mental connection that was instrumental in Harry's revival.

They were still trying to find a way to get revenge on Loki and Osiris for that little prank, but there was not much they could do to disembodied memories.

Unfortunately.

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That night Harry and Ginny had gone to sleep in their respective beds; Ginny in her room on the third landing, Harry in Ron's room on the top floor. Their sleep could not be called restful as they had both shared one of Harry's customary visions surrounding Voldemort's actions for the future.

After jerking awake they had met downstairs, out in the back garden on the small grassy knoll that soon become their special meeting place. That was where the rest of the Weasley family had found them the following morning, sitting on the ground and watching the sunrise in each other's embrace.

The next four nights had been an almost perfect repeat of the first, with the sole exception being that the two teenagers were woken by nightmares, rather than a vision. They would both wake at the same time, having shared their slumbered horrors, and would be unable to return to sleep for the remainder of the night.

Away from Hogwarts, and the tender ministrations of Madam Pomfrey, Harry and Ginny had no access to any dreamless sleep potion. Outside of registered medical facilities the potion was notoriously difficult to get hold of. Thus the pair were soon showing the strain of far too little sleep during the nights. The drawn and taut look did not, from what everyone had told him, suit Harry and most certainly did not suit Ginny's fine features.

At which point, on the fifth night, they had discovered a substitute. Surprisingly enough it actually

worked and without any of the problematic side-effects that commonly occurred from frequent use of dreamless sleep potion.

Of course, Mrs Weasley was concerned about an entirely different set of side-effects when she found out.

It had started just as it always did. The nightmare, this time one of Ginny's --a distorted memory of Tom Riddle's emerging from his diary inside the Chamber of Secrets-- had caused Harry to jerk awake. His breath had been ragged and he could feel the sweat soaking his tee-shirt. After taking a few minutes to regain his composure and steady his wildly beating heart, Harry had got ready to step out of bed and go downstairs to join Ginny.

He had just managed to throw the bedspread aside, checking to make sure he did not disturb Ron during his departure, when the door to Ron's room opened with a low creak. Even without the faint silver glow of the moon, proving just enough illumination for him to make out the features of her face, Harry had known it was Ginny.

Without a word spoken, or a thought made, Ginny had crossed over to Harry's bed. He had immediately divined Ginny's intentions and shifted in the bed to make space for her. Once she had lain down beside him Harry pulled the covers over them both as she snuggled up close against him.

Unlike before, when they would sit together in silence and wait for the coming dawn, the pair had quickly drifted back to sleep.

"Holy crap!! Ginny, what are you doing?!"

That had been the rather startled exclamation that had jolted Harry and Ginny into semi-wakefulness the next morning. Having finally managed to return to sleep after their nightmare, the two teenagers had been naturally reluctant to wake up at what would normally be a decent hour, opting rather to seize the opportunity and sleep in. Thus it was that Ron, whose room they were in, had woken up before they did.

After his customary moaning and groaning in protest, Ron had pulled himself to his feet, only to discover that he was not alone. Ron had become accustomed, over the past week, to waking up to find Harry's bed empty and Harry himself already downstairs. Naturally he'd been somewhat surprised to note, if belatedly, that the room's second bed was still occupied.

A moment later he'd realized that it was doubly occupied.

A moment after that he recognised who it was that had joined Harry.

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Unfortunately he'd chosen to voice his shock rather loudly. Not surprisingly, Harry and Ginny had had a somewhat extreme reaction to being roused from their peaceful slumber. Ron, however, had had to be revived by Mr Weasley before either of the two could begin their profuse, if confused, apologies. Harry, having been sharing the room with Ron, had had his wand close at hand and had quickly snapped it up as he woke, swinging it towards Ron in a blur. It had been sheer luck that Ginny had moved at the same time and jerked her right arm in Ron's general direction.

This action had probably saved Ron's life as Ginny's arm collided with Harry's and diverted his aim upwards towards the ceiling, thus sparing Ron from being on the receiving end of a curse that had blown a foot-wide hole in the roof and almost killed the ghoul in the attic. The poor creature was so traumatised by the near miss that it was nearly a month before it had recovered enough to resume clanking its chains.

Unfortunately Ginny's aim had not been deflected and her wandlessly cast Stunning Spell had managed to knock Ron off his feet and across the room, to slump, unconscious, against the far wall. Doubtless to say, Mrs Weasley had ranted and raved for nearly an hour before calming down enough to let Harry and Ginny try to explain what had happened. Eventually she had relented that perhaps it was not that bad a thing if it allowed the two of them a decent amount of sleep, although she would have preferred some advanced warning about it. Even so Molly had insisted that Ginny return to her own bed that night.

And so she had.

The following morning, upon noticing that neither Harry nor Ginny were down yet, Molly had sent Percy upstairs to check on them. She'd felt that Percy was the most responsible of her children and thus a perfect choice to confirm her suspicions that Ginny had once again sneaked out of her room to join Harry.

Everybody had been highly surprised when Percy had barged into Ron's room only to find it occupied by only his younger sibling and with Harry nowhere in evidence. Being the studious and logical person that he was, Percy had quickly deduced that this probably meant Harry had ventured into Ginny's room instead.

Nobody had been highly surprised, except Percy, when a barrage of curses and hexes greeted him upon barging into his only sister's room. This time it had been Ginny who had grabbed her wand, blowing an even larger hole in the wall next to her door than Harry had the ceiling.

Fred and George were still teasing her about the fact that she had unwittingly created a new window for her room, although they were puzzled as to why she had made it looking inside the Burrow instead of outside. They continued to bring this up long after Bill had repaired the damage, that same day.

Percy, for his part, had been unfortunate enough to cross paths with Harry's runaway wandless magic, which had resulted in something that young Weatherby (which the twins still teased him about) would never be able to live down.

Ron had said it was the best thing he had seen since Draco Malfoy, the amazing bouncing ferret, had graced Hogwarts' halls. Fred and George had been inspired to create a thin-bottomed trick cauldron that produced the same results. Ginny had thought it was both a hilarious and appropriate punishment

for barging in without knocking.

Harry had spent the next week apologising for the mishap.

Mr Weasley had had to work together with Harry and Bill for nearly three hours to restore Percy. The problem had lain in the fact that Harry had been very bleary-eyed at the time and his magic unfocused. All things considered it was an accomplishment that Percy's transfiguration had been properly completed.

Percival Weasley, the amazing flapping secretary bird.

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Harry shook his head and wondered if the young Minister-in-the-making would ever forgive him for the experience. It had taken a great deal to convince Percy that it had truly been an accident and not a malicious attempt on his life.

It was perhaps fortunate for both Harry and Ginny that everyone, well nearly, had been too busy worrying about Percy to berate them for sneaking about again. Molly had eventually recovered from her mild panic attack and, with an air of resignation, sat Harry and Ginny down at the kitchen table before lunch.

"You're going to do this again," she had said, stating it as a fact, not a question.

"Yes," Harry and Ginny had replied in unison.

Molly had frowned, her eyes darting about as she cleared tried to consider the situation from every possible angle. After several minutes of silent deliberation she had looked up at the two waiting teenagers and asked, "Why?"

They had turned to look at each other, conversing with their thoughts about how to respond. To Molly it must have seemed as if they were engaging in the elusive silent communication that some couples are able to achieve. Harry and Ginny, who had known this is what it looked like, had decided to play along since they were, for the time being, unwilling to admit to anyone the special connection that had formed between them.

~Well? Go ahead and tell her.~

Me? You should be the one to tell her; she's your mother.

~What's that have to do with it?~

She knows you better; you're her only daughter.

~Yes, and you're the famous Boy-Who-Lived.~

How exactly does that make me the ideal candidate?

~D'you remember that little incident during my first-year?~

Kind of hard not to forget something like that.

~Well, after that nobody in my family considers me able to make responsible decisions. You on the other hand...~

Responsible? I deliberately stepped in front of a Killing Curse!

~Of course you did. You're a hero and heroes do stupid things like that. Besides, Mum adores you.~

Yeah, but you're her daughter. She won't kill you for this...

Harry and Ginny's conversation had continued along this vein for quite a few minutes, alternating between arguments and counter-arguments regarding which of them should explain the situation. For some reason, probably the fact that Molly was known for her ability to change into a sabre-toothed tiger without needing to be an Animagus, they were a tad reluctant to have this discussion with her.

"It feels right," Ginny had finally told her mother. "It feels... warm. And when we're together I don't feel afraid anymore."

"Ginny, this is happening very quickly and what you're talking about is a very big step," Molly had observed, watching the two of them closely with what looked like a worried eye.

Harry had easily understood her reservations about Ginny and him beginning the physical aspect of their relationship. After all, Ginny was her daughter. She naturally had to know for certain that they both knew the possible consequences of such a decision before she could let the issue rest. Harry would not have expected any less from the kind and caring person that was Molly Weasley.

After shifting her gaze from one anxious teenager to the other, Molly had ventured, "Perhaps it would be better if the two of you took a little time to make sure that this is truly what you want."

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"It is what we want, Mrs Weasley," Harry had answered.

"It's what we *need*, Mum," Ginny had immediately reinforced Harry's words. She looked at her mother with a pleading gleam in her bright brown eyes.

Harry had reached out to place a comforting hand on her shoulder. "I honestly can't say if what we have is right or wrong for us Mrs Weasley. Only the future will be able to show us that, but I do know that our destinies have become entwined and staying separated is simply no longer an option for us."

Ginny then picked up where Harry left off. "We're not blindly rushing into this, Mum. It's just that we're stronger together than when we are alone. We have bond with each other, one that can't be ignored."

"A bond?"

"It keeps the nightmares away," explained Ginny, managing to avoid any elaboration. "Last night was the most peaceful sleep I've had since the Chamber of Secrets."

"Does being together make you both happy?" Molly had asked softly.

Ginny's answer had been a simple, yet heartfelt, "Yes."

That had pretty much settled the matter. Molly had voiced a few half-hearted protests about the idea, but eventually she had acquiesced after hearing Harry and her daughter explain the positive reactions they felt when they were together. After that the three of them had continued to discuss the Burrow's

new sleeping arrangements and the implications thereof for nearly two hours. Eventually Molly had decided that fixing lunch and feeding her brood was more important than having her repeatedly warn Harry and Ginny not to get up to anything inappropriate. "Understand that I trust the two of you to be responsible about this," she had told them sternly, waving her wand at some crisp lettuce. "While I have no objections to the idea of becoming a grandmother, I'd prefer to be blessed with my first grandchildren from my eldest child instead of my youngest." The announcement that Harry would be transferring to Ginny's room had been made over dinner that evening, earning a wide range of reactions from everyone present. Arthur had greeted the news by taking it in stride and gracing the two blushing teenagers with a benevolent smile. Apparently, he had confided with Harry later that night, he had been expecting something like that. From what he had said he had seen the way Harry and Ginny looked at each other and had recognised it as the same look that he still gave his wife. Fred and George had immediately begun whooping and whistling and catcalling. Their plan to start a betting pool on exactly when Harry and Ginny would make them uncles had resulted in Molly almost literally throwing them out of the kitchen and assigning them degnoming duty in the back garden for the remainder of the summer. Bill and Charlie had been somewhat flummoxed, but were otherwise agreeable with the concept as long as Harry behaved himself in an appropriate manner. Their attempt to come across as threatening big brothers was so overstated that it was more amusing than intimidating. Other than that, they willingly offered their support and managed to make both Harry and Ginny blush a fetching shade of red when Bill winked suggestively at them. Percy, who had still been recovering from his time as a secretary bird, had not really been paying attention. He had remained reasonably quiet throughout the meal and simply stated that he had a great deal of office reports to finish writing up and would they kindly keep the noise down. Ron, surprisingly enough, had not raised a single objection to the idea. Of course, this might have been attributed to the fact that he had fallen out of his chair and was sitting on the kitchen floor, staring at Harry, Ginny and his mother in dumbstruck disbelief. Suffice to say that owl traffic between Ron and Hermione increased dramatically after that as Ron did his best to convince Hermione to try and talk (or write) some sense into the two new roommates.

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Not surprisingly Hermione's only response had been a letter to the couple that contained little more than a repeat of Molly's own cautions not to do anything unwise. She had, however, included some notations on a very useful Contraceptive Charm she had read about; just in case they let their hormones get the better of them. Harry and Ginny wisely decided not to ask the bushy haired girl why she knew such a charm.

Since then Harry and Ginny had shared Ginny's room, and her bed, in what could almost be called a platonic manner if one ignored the frequent kisses and heavy petting. It had taken a good deal of resolve, and they'd had one or two close calls, but Harry and Ginny had mutually decided that it would be better to wait for when they both felt it was the right time. Until then there was still a wide variety of other activities for them to experiment with. Of course this did not stop Fred and George from implying that something untoward was going on in Ginny's room every breakfast for the first couple of weeks. They'd only desisted after Ginny transfigured all the knives and forks on the kitchen table one morning into pixie-sized flying valkyries that sang Wagner as they chased the twins around the Burrow with some of Molly's knitting needles. Even Percy had found that amusing and whenever the two pranksters tried to tease him about his time as a secretary bird, he would begin whistling *Ride of the Valkyries* as a counter offensive. A gentle rap on the door to Ginny's room brought Harry out of his musings. He looked up and, after making sure he and his sleeping girlfriend were both presentable, called out, "Come in." The doorknob, slowly and cautiously, turned and then the door was pushed open. Harry immediately began to smile and count to ten, waiting for their morning visitor to step inside. This was one of the consequences of Percy's intrusion into Ginny's room and his subsequent transfiguration. He would now always knock on any door and wait for permission before entering. Even then he always waited for a count of ten before stepping inside - just in case. Harry had asked about it and learned from Arthur that Percy was even doing it at work in the Ministry. Apparently he had developed something of a phobia about walking through doors.

...eight... nine... ten.

As Harry finished counting, Percy stuck his head in and peered at the two teenagers through his horn rimmed glasses.

"Mum wants you to know that breakfast is ready," he said, frowning slightly as he noticed that neither of them were up and about yet.

"We'll be down in a few minutes, Percy. Thanks," Harry replied.

After nodding sharply Percy quietly pulled the door shut. Harry could hear his footsteps receding down the stairs. Chuckling and shaking his head, Harry turned his attention back to the slumbering Ginny and gently shook her by the shoulder.

Wake up, Gin. Come on, love, it's time to get up.

~Mmmnnh.~

With the utmost care he rolled Ginny off his chest and onto her back. With his one arm still wrapped around her shoulders, Harry leaned across to kiss Ginny's cheek as her eyes fluttered open. Blinking she smiled sleepily and mumbled, "Morning..."

"Good morning, sleepyhead," he teased gently, shifting his arm so that he could playfully ruffle her

hair with his hand.

"Twit," retorted Ginny, stifling a yawn. She turned to him, rubbing her eyes, "Normal witches and wizards don't get up at the crack of dawn like you do, Harry."

Harry grinned and kissed her again before rolling away and pushing off the bed. As he made his way to the dresser that had been added to hold his own clothes, he could hear Ginny stretching lazily in the bed behind him. Pulling off his wrinkled tee-shirt and draping it over the back of a nearby chair, he turned to look at her.

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"We have to go down for breakfast," he told her as she lounged there, half under the bedcovers. "We're going to Diagon Alley today, remember?"

"I remember," Ginny admitted, sitting up. Her fiery hair cascaded down past her shoulders as she moved. It framed her face and contrasted against the pastel cream of her nightshirt, which had slipped down to bare both shoulders in an innocent yet tantalizing manner.

Deciding to concentrate on getting dressed rather than staring, Harry turned back to the dresser and began searching for a fresh tee-shirt and boxers to put on after he showered. He had just pulled out the glaring orange Chudley Cannons tee-shirt Ron had got him for his birthday this year, at Harry's very first birthday party, when Ginny's arms snaked around his waist.

As she sidled up behind him Ginny asked, "You aren't seriously thinking about wearing *that* to Diagon Alley."

"Maybe," smirked Harry, "but I promise to put something over it."

"It's going to be a little hot for your trenchrobe, don't you think?"

Harry shrugged. "The heat doesn't bother me. Besides, the trenchrobe's charmed to always keep a comfortable temperature. Or maybe I'll just wear one of my other shirts over it."

Ginny gave him a squeeze then reached around him to finger the disassembled pair of Omninoculars lying on the dresser's top. "How's this coming along? It's been a couple of weeks."

"Pretty well," he acknowledged, motioning at the three pairs of Muggle sunglasses that were scattered around the Omninoculars. Thick piles of parchment, covered in his handwriting, lay beneath the sunglasses, indicators of Harry's hard work on this little side project that he was planning on surprising Fred and George with.

"I think everything should be ready by Christmas," he continued, straightening his notes. "Your father was a great help in sorting out the charms I need to use."

"If these actually work, you and the twins will make a killing," mused Ginny, leaving the Omninoculars be so that she could pick one of the sunglasses up. She held the stylish, yet inexpensive, frames up for inspection and muttered, "These certainly are easier to carry around."

Harry laughed. "I'm sure your mum will approve of them more than she does Fred and George's fake wands and trick sweets."

Ginny nodded her agreement and set the sunglasses down on top of a short stack of notes. "Are you ever going to tell her that you're the mysterious benefactor that funded Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes?" This time Harry laughed even louder and shook his head, "No way! Not after the twins slipped her some of my Chewing Clown Gum during my birthday party. If she ever found out I was responsible for that, not even the Order could save me."

Probably true.

Still, if you tell her that you're trying to set them up for a more respectable business than a simple joke shop, she might forgive you...

"Oh, joy," sighed Ginny, resting her head on Harry's shoulder, "the peanut gallery is awake."

Oi!

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2. The Shopping Trip

Car chases, as a general rule, were not something that happened in London. No, no, car chases, like you see in the movies, are only supposed to happen in cities like Los Angeles and New York or, if James Bond was in town, somewhere on the continent. But not in the streets of downtown London one late summer morning.

Truth be told though, it really wasn't much of a car chase, especially since only one car was involved. Still, from the way the car had been driven, you could be forgiven for thinking that it was involved in a high speed car chase.

It was an odd car to see in London, not so much because of its make and model, but because of its rather eclectic paint job. It was an old, and slightly battered Volkswagen, which had once been owned by someone who greatly enjoyed the sixties, if the psychedelic purple with large yellow sunflowers was any indication.

If anyone were to guess they could probably think that whoever was driving thought it still was the sixties. Doubtless they would also think the driver was using something that they would very much like to try for themselves. After all, listening to the screams of pure terror from the passengers in the car, not to mention the way the vehicle was being handled, this was indeed a very likely possibility.

"NO, NO! TURN LEFT! NO! LEFT! AAAAAAAHHHHH!!!"

The car sped down the road, swerving in and out through the traffic. Somehow it managed to navigate between the other cars with only inches, sometimes less, to spare.

"WATCH OUT! NO! LOOK OUT FOR THOSE MUGGLES!!!"

With a deft twist of the steering wheel the Volkswagen slipped though a gap between two groups of terrified people caught walking on the pedestrian crossing.

"IdontwanttodieIdontwanttodieIdontwanttodie..."

With a squeal of spinning tires the car rounded a corner at a speed that caused it to ride up on two wheels, balancing precariously before dropping back down with a thud.

"STAY ON THE ROAD! STAY ON THE ROAD! THE ROAD!!"

People scattered left and right, as well as a few other directions, as the runaway car veered onto the pavement, leaving a trail of traumatised pedestrians behind it.

"ARE YOU OUT OF YOUR MIND?! YOU'RE GOING TO GET US ALL KILLED!!"

Back on the road again, the car skidded about before returning to the correct side of the road, but only after clipping off the side mirrors of half a dozen parked cars.

"ImgoingtodieImgoingtodieImgoingtodie..."

The car became airborne, as it crested a low hill, and seemed to hang suspended for several seconds before crashing back onto the road with a spray of sparks.

"THIS IS NOT A BROOM AND WE ARE NOT PLAYING A GAME OF QUIDDITCH!!"

Swerving across two lanes of traffic the Volkswagen was rapidly approaching a tiny looking pub that seemed almost squashed insignificantly between the buildings on either side.

"NO! LEFT! NO! RIGHT! NO, NO, LEFT! LEFT!!"

Without warning the purple car twisted, careening wildly towards an empty parking spot just outside the pub. Its tires left behind looping black tracks of burnt rubber as the car spun around in a full circle, not once, not twice, but three times. With an abrupt jerk and shudder the car came to a rest, neatly parked between two other vehicles, with scarcely a foot of clearance on either side.

"I didn't die?"

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"Well, of course you didn't, Ron," declared Bill Weasley, brushing back his fringe as he looked over his shoulder at his two siblings that were seating on the backseat. He grinned roguishly at his brother and sister. "Was there ever any doubt that I'd get you here safe and sound?"

"Bill, you are a good wizard, an amazing curse breaker and all round a great older brother who I love dearly," said Ginny in a somewhat shaky voice, "but I'm *never* getting into a car with you again. Ever."

"Come on," Bill protested, "it couldn't have been *that* bad."

"No," agreed Ron, looking a pale green, "it was worse."

Harry, sitting white-faced in the passenger seat next to Bill, looked back at Ron, "What do you have to complain about? I'm the one that suffered a front row seat."

After hastily vacating the car, lest they be trapped inside with Bill, the three Hogwarts students took several minutes trying to regain their composure. Ginny, whose legs still felt like jelly, waited impatiently next to Harry as Ron and Bill argued over the use of the Muggle parking meter. Just then the door to the Leaky Cauldron swung open and Ginny felt her shoulders tense as her jaw clenched tight. It was purely a reflex action, prompted by the sight of the white-blonde haired woman that came walking out. For a moment Ginny had thought it was Narcissa Malfoy, Draco's mother, whom she had seen at the Quidditch World Cup two years before.

~Easy there, my little filly,~ Harry told her, reaching over to hold her hand.

After getting a better look at the woman, as she and her dark haired companion stepped outside, Ginny realized that she was getting worked up over nothing. The woman did indeed have blonde hair that was so light as to be almost silver. However her eyes were dancing with merriment rather than disdain and an ethereal smile graced her delicate features as her partner spoke.

"You can't make an omelette without breaking some eggs," he was saying to her in what sounded like an American accent. He was wearing a trench coat --a Muggle trench coat-- and was twirling what looked suspiciously like a Muggle flashlight in one hand.

"If you made an omelette, I'd be expectin' to find the kitchen blown t' bits!" retorted the woman with a soft Irish accent that played far smoother on the ears than Seamus Finnigan's.

As the couple wound their way down the street and disappeared round a corner, Harry and Ginny found that Ron and Bill had finally solved the parking meter. Harry, as chivalrous as ever, held the door to the pub open and allowed Ginny to enter first, followed by Ron, then Bill.

What do you mean, 'little'? asked Ginny silently as they were greeted by Tom the wizened bartender, who seemed extraordinarily pleased to see Harry again. *I'm not little!*

~You certainly aren't,~ agreed Harry as he shook Tom's hand, glancing towards Ginny with a suggestive gleam in his eyes. He smiled happily and declined Tom's offer for a drink, *~In fact, I'm rather fond of those parts of you that aren't so little anymore...~*

Harry! Ginny prayed that the subdued lighting inside the Leaky Cauldron would prevent her two brothers from noticing and commenting on her fierce blush. Almost unconsciously she crossed her arms in front of her chest as Bill called for them to hurry up.

"Three up and two across," Bill observed as he tapped his wand against the appropriate brick. As the archway began to form he turned to Ron. "Where did you say Hermione was going to meet you?"

"Outside Gringotts," replied Ron, his eagerness to be reunited with his girlfriend fairly obvious by the way he was bouncing impatiently from foot to foot.

The archway finished formed, revealing the crooked cobblestone street, crowded with witches and wizards going about their business. Ginny smiled when Harry offered her his hand, which she took as they started winding their way down the alley.

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They had not managed to make it past more than one or two stores when a familiar, honey-coated, voice caught their attention. "Really, Potter, I'm disappointed. Still dating the Knutless Weasley girl I see."

Well, at least it's not the arsehole.

~Yeah,~ was Harry's sarcastic reply, *~and a queen-bitch is so much better.~*

Ginny turned, gritting her teeth as she did, to face a smug Pansy Parkinson. The Slytherin girl smirked at them, looking disdainfully down her nose at Ginny. She graced Harry with what she obviously thought was a coy and flirtatious smile, "Why don't you try a proper witch who has the means to make herself presentable? You don't know what you're missing..."

"Which is probably a good thing," replied Harry, the calm tone of his voice belying the anger that Ginny could feel building inside of him.

~I want to turn her into rat and feed her to Crookshanks!~

Harry, we're in a public place, Ginny warned, *You're not allowed to do that.*

~I didn't say that I was going to do it, just that I wanted to.~

We could arrange it if you like.

~...~

...

Or perhaps not.

The obviously false smile Parkinson had been wearing dissolved into a frustrated and annoyed expression. Ginny could almost see the gears starting to turn as Parkinson's disgruntled look changed to a calculating one, her narrow eyes beginning to gleam maliciously.

"I heard that your uncle tried to kill you..." observed Parkinson, grinning once again, "and you even paid him for it. What was it? Five hundred Galleons?"

"One thousand," corrected Harry through clenched teeth, his eyes narrowed to dangerous slits.

By now Ron had worked himself into a fit righteous indignation and stepped forward to aid his friend by retorting, "Considering the fun Harry had in blowing up their whole house; I'd say it was worth it." Parkinson arched a fine eyebrow and smirked. "What would a beggar like you know about worth?"

It was perhaps fortunate that Molly Weasley had been unable to accompany the three students that day, sending Bill in her place. If she had been present, Molly would undoubtedly have been shocked and appalled at her youngest son's explicit vocabulary.

He's almost as talented as you are, my dear Virginia.

"Such language, Weasel," taunted Parkinson as Bill tried to restrain Ron, using both of his hands to pull the boy back. Despite the fact that she was talking, Harry and Bill were focused on Ron, and Ron was focused on attempting to pull free from Bill's grasp. As such, none of the three men saw what followed.

BANG!!

"WAAAAARRK!!"

Bill was so surprised that he relaxed his hold on Ron, letting the younger male pull free. Ron, however, was similarly dumbstruck and simply stumbled forward. Harry turned from the spot where Parkinson had been standing and looked at Ginny.

~You should've waited for Hermione to join us,~ he noted, breaking into a grin as he turned back to look at the result of her slight of wand. Ginny matched his grin and stepped up beside him, slipping her slender arm around his waist.

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"WAAAAARRK!!"

Pansy Parkinson, or rather the somewhat shocked ostrich that had replaced her, was looking about in panic. Her extraordinarily long neck was twisting back and forth, while the short wings that had been her arms, jerked up and down, fluffing her feathers out.

"WAAAAARRK!!"

"Ginny," said Harry, examining the frantic bird, "you are aware, aren't you, that it is the *male* ostriches that have black and white plumage."

"WAAAA--"

Parkinson's squawk cut off abruptly and the ostrich stared at Harry, horror visibly blooming in the girl's now avian eyes. Harry shrugged helplessly and nodded his confirmation, causing Parkinson to become even more frantic. With a piercing squawk the ostrich took off down the length of Diagon Alley, stubby wings flapping uselessly.

"WAAAAARRK!! WAAAAARRK!! WAAAAARRK!!"

"Ginny! How could you? I honestly can't believe you did that!"

Ron slipped an arm around his bushy haired girlfriend's shoulder, holding her close as she voiced her astonishment and disapproval at Ginny's actions. Hermione, even during the summer holidays, was a staunch supporter of following the Rules, even when it involved dealing with ingratiating Slytherin prima donnas.

Good to know some things never change.

Bill, who needed to finish some business with the Gringotts goblins, had given the four teenagers permission to gather what they needed in Diagon Alley without him, provided they stayed out of trouble. They agreed to meet up with him at Florean Fortescue's Ice-Cream Parlour for a treat before returning to the Burrow.

"She deserved it," answered Ginny with conviction. The fiery headed young woman crossed her arms as they approached Flourish and Blotts. "She's just lucky I didn't turn her into a rat and feed her to Crookshanks."

"Hey!" exclaimed Harry, "that was my idea!"

Ginny smirked as they entered the bookstore. "Great minds."

Ron rolled his eyes and kissed Hermione on the cheek as they followed Harry and Ginny inside.

Hermione was scowling in disapproval, but Ron knew her well enough to recognise the glint of amusement hidden within her large cinnamon coloured eyes. She might not act it, maintaining her appearance as a stick-in-the-mud, but secretly she was probably laughing her head off.

"Oh, this is perfect," said Harry, looking over the list of books they needed. "*Curses and Counter-Curses (Bewitch your Friends and Befuddle your Enemies with the Latest Revenges: Hair Loss, Jelly-Legs, Tongue-Tying and much, much, more) by Professor Vindictus Viridian*."

"What about it?" asked Ron, looking over his own list and spotting the relevant book right underneath *The Standard Book of Spells (Grade 6)*.

Harry grinned boyishly. "I've wanted this book ever since I found out I was a wizard. Hagrid wouldn't let me buy it though - said it was too advanced."

Hermione, who had handed her list to one of the shop assistants, asked, "Whatever did you want that for during our first year?"

"To curse Dudley, of course!" replied Harry, as if it were obvious.

"Which would probably have ended up with you getting shot by your uncle a good deal sooner,"

retorted Ginny, frowning unhappily as she recalled the events of the beginning of the summer.

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"You're probably right," Harry agreed with a sheepish grin. He glanced to the counter where the assistant was dropping of three sets of sixth-year books. "I wonder who the new Defence Against the Dark Arts professor is this year? I wish Remus could've stayed on, but Dumbledore wanted him out in the field with Sirius, monitoring Death Eater activities."

Ron clapped Harry on the back. "Well, whoever it is, they can't be all that bad. After first Quirrel and that dimwit Lockhart, anything's an improvement."

Right? Right.

Ginny, handing over the slip for the few fifth-year books she needed, shook her head in disagreement.

"D'you remember Mad-Eye Moody? Or should I say Barty Crouch Junior?"

"Well..." Ron frowned, humming and hawing for a moment, "he may have been a maniacal, murdering Death Eater in disguise, but at least he taught us something useful."

"Constant Vigilance," intoned a voice that they all recognised. The group turned around to see Fred emerging from behind one of the many book stacks. The broadly grinning boy stepped up to give Hermione a brief and friendly hug by way of greeting.

Trying not to become jealous over his brother's chaste embrace, Ron looked at Fred in puzzlement and asked, "Fred, what are you doing here? I thought it was George's turn in the bookshop. Aren't you supposed to be working at Fortescue's?"

The twins, acting on advice from Harry, Remus, Bill and their father, Arthur, were working at several shops in Diagon Alley. The idea was for them to gain experience in the business world, and the ins and outs of running a business, before trying to open their joke shop. It had been Harry, in the end, who had convinced them to proceed in this manner, though Ron had no idea how his friend had managed it.

"I *am* George!" replied the twin. "You got it all mixed up - Fred's over at the ice-cream parlour, waiting for you lot to join him for lunch. I'm the poor soul that gets to work with the musty books today."

Ron looked to Harry and Ginny who, thanks to the Order, were supposedly able to read a person's magical aura. It was only after they both shook their heads that Ron remembered them telling him that Fred and George were identical to the point that even their auras were the same.

"I'm amazed the two of you have lasted this long at these jobs," commented Ginny as George walked behind the counter and began packing the books into large, brown paper bags. "I'd have thought you would've been sacked ages ago for pulling pranks on every customer unlucky enough to cross your paths."

"Just because we enjoy a good laugh as much as the next bloke," George rejoined, stuffing a copy of *Advanced Transfiguration* into a bag.

Ron leaned close to Hermione and whispered into her ear as his brother spoke. "A bit more than the next bloke I'd reckon."

Hermione had to stifle a giggle as George, who had not heard Ron's barb, continued packing, "Don't think that Fred and I can't be as serious as Perfect Percy when we need to be. Besides, as Harry said when he sold us on the idea, it will be good experience for the future when we're running our own shop."

"George," asked Hermione, leading the conversation back to one of her favourite subjects, books, "do you have any study guides or books that'll help me prepare for our N.E.W.T.s?"

"Mione!" protested Ron, looking at his girlfriend with exasperation, "We're only in our *sixth year*!

How can you even think about starting to study for your N.E.W.T.s?"

Sometimes I worry about her, thought Ron, *How can she always be so... so... studious?!*

Hermione huffed and crossed her arms defensively across her chest. "Unlike you, Ronald, I'm fully aware of just how taxing the N.E.W.T.s can be, and the sooner I'm ready to face them, the better!"

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Ron held his hands up in an attempt at appeasement. "I know, I know, but you got more O.W.L.s than Percy did! Even if you didn't study you'd probably get more N.E.W.T.s than I will."

"I dare say you could do better if you would at least *try* studying yourself," replied Hermione, unwilling to let the matter drop so quickly and easily as Ron would have liked.

I think this is getting out of hand. It hasn't even been an hour and already we're arguing.

"Ere you go," announced George, who had ducked down below the counter to look her Hermione's request. Ron, who was beginning to detect the formation of one of his and Hermione's legendary arguments, could have kissed his older brother for the distraction as George dropped a book on the countertop with a thud.

Harry, who had been watching from the sidelines, leaned forward to look at the book and read out, "*So You're Taking Your N.E.W.T.s Are You? (Start Praying – It'll Help)*" He looked up at George and then across to Hermione. "My, this sounds like a fine piece of light reading. Mind if I borrow it sometime?"

Hermione, knowing that her friend was teasing her, scowled and told George to put the book with the rest of her purchases. The twin grinned at her and then winked at Ron, picking the book up and carefully slipping it into one of the bags he had already prepared. With all their books finally packed away --Harry and Ginny double-checked the bags for booby traps, just in case-- the four teenagers exited Flourish and Blotts, heading out to collect the rest of their supplies for the school year.

On their way to the apothecary, they met Seamus Finnigan and Moira Mackay, the Gryffindor Quidditch team's new Beaters, outside of Quality Quidditch Supplies. Even though Seamus was going into his sixth year at Hogwarts, and Moira only her third year, the pair had become almost inseparable during Quidditch practice the previous year.

Fred and George, the first team Beaters at the time, had taken a liking to them both and thought of Seamus and Moira as their protégés, which had resulted in a great deal of concern that the new Beaters would no doubt be as insane as the old ones. So far their performance during the single match they had played (against Slytherin) seemed to confirm this, although everyone had to admit that Moira was the more dangerous of the two.

After exchanging a few pleasantries with the two Beaters and catching up on things they continued on their way, meeting friends and fellow pupils every so often. Ron, Harry and Ginny talked for a few minutes with Terry Boot and Padma Patil of Ravenclaw, both of whom were planning on trying out for their house Quidditch team. Hermione, who could not bear discussion of the game, spent the time conversing with Parvati Patil, one of her fellow sixth-year girls and Padma's twin sister.

They even had a brief --just passing really-- encounter with Vincent Crabbe and Gregory Goyle, the two looming Slytherin boys who usually stood as matching bookends to either side of Draco Malfoy. This time however, much to everyone's surprise and relief, the duo were not accompanying their master.

"I wonder where the ferret is hiding," remarked Ron as they parted ways. "It's rather unusual to see those two without him squeezed in between."

"I think Malfoy is probably busy with other activities," answered Harry, looking grimly over his shoulder at the retreating forms of Crabbe and Goyle. He glanced across at Ginny, and the two seemed to have an entire conversation in just that one look, something Ron had noticed a lot of over the past couple of months.

Hermione frowned in consideration and asked, "Do you really think Malfoy's become a Death Eater?" It was Ginny that answered with a shrug, "We haven't had any visions of Tom since the beginning of the summer. If Malfoy did receive a Dark Mark, we won't know about it until we see him."

Harry nodded his agreement. "When I spoke to Sirius on my birthday he mentioned that Snape hasn't heard anything about Draco being inducted, although he said Lucius had been acting oddly."

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"Guess we'll find out tomorrow then," Ron said, letting the matter slip from his mind as they almost walked into one of the several Aurors that were posted up and down the length of Diagon Alley.

Finally, after about two or so hours, the quartet finished their shopping and strolled down the pleasantly sunny street to Florean Fortescue's. They were immediately greeted by a beaming Fred Weasley, dressed in a waiter's uniform, as they walked to an outside table and sat themselves down.

"Lo, Fred," greeted Ron, taking one of the menus his brother was handing out.

"No, no, no, *I'm* George!" corrected Fred - or perhaps it really was George. "You've got it backwards - today is Fred's turn at Flourish and Blotts."

Ron, ever unwilling to fully grow up, insisted on them all having the same strawberry and peanutbutter flavour they had tried several years before. Despite George's assurances that he wouldn't do anything untoward with their ice-cream, Ron insisted on following him inside the parlour, dragging Ginny with him since she would be more likely to detect any charms or hexes used by their trickster brother.

"I heard from Ron in one of his letters that Ginny wasn't made a Prefect," admitted Hermione, once she and Harry were sitting alone at their table.

"Yeah," agreed Harry, "Carmen and Jefferson got chosen instead."

Hermione looked closely at Harry and asked, "You're not disappointed are you? That she isn't a Prefect with us?"

Harry smiled and shook his head. "Not at all. Personally I think she would make a great Prefect, but I do have a modicum of faith in the teacher's decision. Carmen will do just as fine a job, maybe even better. Besides, neither of us were really holding any hope after the way she... assaulted Snape."

Satisfied that Ginny's lack of selection as a Prefect was not about to cause any problems in her friend's relationship, Hermione turned to peer into the ice-cream parlour. Craning her head around a stone column that was blocking her view, she thought she could make out a glimpse of Weasley red hair, but there were a great many patrons inside.

"How's your holiday been?" she asked, settling in her seat. "We haven't really written to each other all

that much since your birthday. Everything all right at the Burrow?"

"Ginny and I are still sleeping in the same bed if that's what you're asking," replied Harry dryly, leaning forward to prop his elbow on the table as she tried not to blush.

Since when was Harry so insightful?

Clearing her throat Hermione asked, "I certainly hope you're not expecting to sleep together tonight. Not while I'm staying in Ginny's room."

Harry chuckled and replied in a suggestive tone, "You're welcome to share, or you could spend the night in Ron's room... I'm sure he'd love the company..."

"Harry!" Hermione almost fell out of her chair she jerked back so quickly. She spluttered incoherently for a second or two, aware of the blood rushing to her face and making her cheeks burn. Collecting herself as best she could, she stated in a firm voice, "I am not going to sleep in Ron's bedroom!" Harry smiled smugly at her and cocked an eyebrow. "In that case you'll just have to grit your teeth and try to bear having me in the same room as you."

Hermione shook her head. "Not bloody likely. Mrs Weasley is reluctant enough as it is trusting you with only Ginny. There's no way come hell or high water that she'd let you stay in a room with *two* girls."

"We haven't done anything we promised not to," said Harry defensively. "Even with that nifty contraceptive charm you sent us we decided to wait for a more appropriate time before taking such a step."

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"So you haven't done *anything*?" asked Hermione incredulously. *I don't believe it.*

The blush that rose to Harry's cheek was satisfying to watch as he ducked his head and admitted in a quiet mumble, "We've done... things."

Hermione grinned wickedly and pried, "Then tell me... is Ginny a screamer?"

She was slightly disappointed that Harry was not able to match Ron or Ginny when it came to blushing, but he did produce an admirable attempt at imitating a tomato. Still, watching as Harry's eyes almost popped out of their sockets and he came close to falling off his chair, Hermione had to laugh at her friends embarrassed discomfort.

"I hope you put up a lot of Silencing Charms," she teased, wagging a finger at him.

"Has there been any word in *The Daily Prophet* about any Death Eater attacks?" countered Harry, blatantly trying to change the topic to something less intimate than his and Ginny's sex lives.

Hermione grinned knowingly, "Okay. Fine. Change the topic, I don't mind – I can always interrogate Ginny tonight, while you're sleeping in Ron's room. And to answer your question; no, there's been nothing in *The Daily Prophet* about Voldemort or his Death Eaters. The summer's been dead quiet." Harry frowned. "That's what's making me nervous."

"Yeah," agreed Hermione before asking, "Why d'you ask though? I mean, you're staying at the Burrow this summer. Surely Mr Weasley, or even Percy, should know if anything had happened."

"I know," admitted Harry, "but I wouldn't put it past Fudge to try and keep Mr Weasley out of the loop, just to spite us."

Hermione was nodding her agreement with Harry's assessment when Ron and Ginny returned to the table, each carrying two large helpings of strawberry and peanut-butter ice-cream. Ron set one of the ice-creams down in front of Hermione and then sat down next to her.

"Here we go," announced Ginny as she settled in Harry's lap, looking extraordinarily comfortable as she did so, something that Hermione noticed Ron watching with resignation.

I wonder how he'd react if I tried that with him?

With a mischievous grin that would have done credit to Fred and George, Hermione decided to find out.

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3. Journey to Hogwarts

"We're going to die."

Harry, feeling too tired to answer, simply nodded.

"I can't survive like this."

Again, his exhaustion overwhelming his ability to speak, Harry nodded.

"Harry, what are we going to do?"

"I don't know, Gin," he replied hoarsely, "but if we have to sleep in separate beds at Hogwarts, I'm not going to survive the year."

The sun was just beginning to crest over the horizon, ending what had probably been the most restless night of Harry and Ginny's lives. For the first time since the start of summer, the two young adults were sitting outside, on what had long since become 'their' grassy knoll, waiting for the sunrise. It was a magnificent sunrise, almost a recipe for splendour. A few scarce clouds hung high in the otherwise clear sky, which was that perfect deep blue the precedes the dawn. Light from the slow rising sun seemed to linger on the clouds so that they glowed scarlet and orange and gold against the lightening blue, as if lit from a hidden fire within.

It was the kind of moment, of transient beauty, that lovers were supposed to share in each others arms. They were supposed to be feeling warm and at peace, content to simply sit, or lie, side by side in companionable silence. It was supposed to be a perfectly opportune time for tender kisses and embraces, a romantic instant if there ever was one.

Naturally Harry and Ginny hated every second of it.

With the rising of the morning sun, their last night at the Burrow before returning to Hogwarts drew to an end. Ordinarily this would not have bothered either of the two. Unfortunately, however, their

sleeping routine had been interrupted by Hermione's arrival the day before and Molly Weasley's insistence that she sleep in Ginny's room. A consequence of this decision was that Harry had been ousted from his cohabitation of said room and transferred to Ron's room for the duration of Hermione's stay.

To sum the situation up succinctly, it had been a long and restless night.

"It's funny," Harry said after a few minutes quiet, "but this is the first time I *don't* want to go back to Hogwarts."

"Maybe it'll get better if we give it some time," Ginny tried, not sounding very convinced, "got used to sleeping alone again."

Harry flopped back onto the grass, staring up at the sparse clouds. "Quite frankly I wasn't exactly sleeping all that well before we started sharing a bed. Somehow I don't think anything is going to change in that regard."

Ginny sighed and lay down beside to him. "Perhaps we should try and look on the bright side of things."

"And what might that be?"

"..."

"Well?"

"Er..."

As soon as she thinks of something we'll let you know.

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"Gah!" Startled, Ginny jerked up into a sitting position. Even after nearly two months of having the various members of the Order communicating with her in this manner, Ginny was still unused to their voices suddenly popping into her mind.

Relax, soothed a soft feminine voice. **It's only us.**

"Something that does not exactly inspire peace and calm, Miko," noted Harry wryly, sitting up and slipping his hand around Ginny's waist.

You all right, Gin? he asked silently.

~Yeah, fine,~ his girlfriend replied, *~Just a little startled, that's all.~*

"Do you lot have to sneak up on us like that?" asked Ginny, having quickly regained her composure.

That would be difficult.

Aye, we don't exactly have bodies to make loud footsteps with now, do we?

Harry rolled his eyes and pushed to his feet, casually brushing down his jeans before offering Ginny a hand to help her up. She grabbed hold and pulled herself up, brushing against him as she rose to stand within his embrace. He draped his arm around Ginny's shoulders while she slipped hers around his waist as they slowly descended from the low rise of their grassy knoll, back to the Burrow.

"Why is it," Ginny asked as they approached the kitchen door, "that just when things seem to finally be going right and everything is back on track, the universe decides to throw us off a high cliff and leave us hanging?"

"Just lucky I guess."

"Whoa! What happened to the two of you?"

"You look like you stayed up the entire night."

"They must have. Look - they're both ruffled."

"Harry, you didn't stay up all night with our sister did you?"

"You're supposed to say you didn't..."

"They haven't said it..."

"You didn't..."

"You did!"

"You cad!"

"You savage!"

"You beast!"

"You stud!"

"You-"

"You two are going to have your throats ripped open if you don't shut up," threatened Ginny, waving a fist in front of her brothers. She was tired, stiff from sitting outside all night, and definitely not in the mood to put up with Fred and George's antics.

"Don't get your knickers twisted, Gin-Gin," placated Fred, holding his hands up. "We know you two haven't done anything indecent."

George nodded in agreement. "Our room's right next to yours and we haven't heard so much as a peep the entire summer."

Thanks to judicious use of a Silencing Charm over the entire room, thought Ginny as she made her way to the kitchen table and pulled out a chair.

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~Don't forget the door and windows,~ replied Harry, sitting opposite her.

Ginny, despite her tiredness, grinned impishly at him. *Not to mention the bedsprings and the headboard, hmm?*

Harry gave her a playful smirk and reached for the jug of apple juice, *~We were nothing if not thorough and discreet.~*

Of course you were. Look at who you had for teachers.

~I hate to break this to you, Sun, but I was sneaking around Hogwarts for years before you lot came

into my life.~

Quite successfully too, agreed Ginny, smiling.

"Of course..." Naturally the twins were not finished with their routine and had continued their chatter through Harry and Ginny's internal dialogue. "...There was that time when you decided to redecorate and put in that extra window."

"And remember that unfortunate incident with Percy?"

Molly Weasley, who until now had been bent over the stove cooking the sausages, bore down on her two wayward children. "Fred! George! Leave your poor sister and Harry alone. It's obvious that they've had a very rough night. There's no need for you two to make their morning as difficult."

George, who seemed to have the focus of their mother's attention, nodded his head sheepishly and tried to look appropriately ashamed. Fred on the other hand, turned towards Harry and Ginny in a way that prevented Molly from seeing, and cracked his one hand as if using a whip.

"Fred! Don't be rude!" snapped Molly as she set the large platter of sausages on the tabletop, turning to glare fiercely at her misbehaving son.

"I need coffee," grumbled Ginny as Harry took a long sip of his juice.

Across from her Harry shook his head. "I honestly don't know how you could even *pretend* to like that disgusting stuff."

Ginny looked up at him, shovelling a few sausages onto her plate. "What's wrong with it?"

"Nothing really," Harry admitted after a moment, helping himself to a couple slices of toast, "but how can you drink it without sugar or cream?"

~Uncle Vernon used to have it every morning.~

Ginny frowned slightly. Since their bond had formed, thanks in part to the Order of the Phoenix as well as several other occurrences, Harry and Ginny would often convey to each other thoughts that they preferred not to share with anyone else.

Does it bring back bad memories? she asked, wondering if perhaps she ought to switch her drink of choice to tea instead.

~Nothing too bad.~ he replied with an almost imperceptible shake of his head, ~It's just I'm still a little bit touchy when it comes to the Dursleys.~

"Harry, Harry, Harry," lectured Fred, sitting down next to him, "has anyone in our family ever told you about the infamous espresso incident?"

Ginny could only bite back a groan and try not to drop her head in her food as Harry cautiously shook his head. Fred and George immediately seized the opportunity and began their dramatic re-enactment of what had happened several years earlier. This was going to be almost as bad as that damn stupid love poem she had written.

George began the tale. "Picture it. The Burrow. The summer before Fred and mine's second year at Hogwarts. Our father, fine man that he is, succumbs to his curiosity..."

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"One day he brings home a Muggle espresso machine, although he doesn't really know exactly what it is or does," continued Fred, gesturing with broad sweeps of his arms.

Do they remember every little embarrassing thing I've ever done? wondered Ginny,

~Probably.~

"Naturally it was our favourite sister-"

"Our only sister for that matter-"

"Who was able to deduce its inner workings." George gleefully rubbed his hands together, chuckling evilly. "And just as naturally, she decides to try the noxious brew herself before the rest of us could get our hands on it."

~I think I can see where this is leading,~ she heard from Harry.

Ginny narrowed her eyes dangerously and raised her knife in front of Fred's nose. Both twins became silent as she ground out through clenched teeth, "Do you want me to hurt you, you blistering idiots!?"

Harry nodded his support. "Honestly, chaps, we appreciate your attempts to... cheer us up, but after last night we're just too exhausted to handle it right now."

Aw... but I want to hear how much noxious brew our fair Gin-Gin imbibed in...

Loki, shut up.

"Disaster! Alas, murder most foul!" Fred immediately proclaimed, clasping his hands theatrically over his heart. "Tragedy and assassination! Mayhem and slaughter! Complete bedlam and utter ruin!"

Ginny suspected that Fred was trying to say that, for the time being, he sympathised completely with their plight. It was always a matter of guesswork, deciphering what either of the twins meant. Their command of the English language had never been anything less than perfect, however they occasional see fit make everyone else doubt that.

"Discovered how to open the dictionary, did you?" asked Harry lightly, spearing one of the sausages on his plate with his fork.

"The dictionary, the thesaurus and the encyclopaedia, old bean!" confirmed George, holding his head high while at the same time puffing his chest out with pride.

Great, Ginny thought.

Harry laughed and started munching on some toast. "Spiffing."

The playful banter continued even after Percy came downstairs for his breakfast, expressing mild surprise to see Ginny and Harry up and about so early. The lenses of his horn-rimmed glasses glinted in the rich morning sunlight that shone through the kitchen windows as he sat down.

"I'm surprised to see you out of bed so early, Ginny," Percy stated, helping himself to the food spread out on the table. "Did you decide to get a head start for your journey to Hogwarts?"

"You're assuming that at some point or another I was actually in bed," replied Ginny dryly, sipping at her coffee.

Molly, now bringing a platter of bacon to the table, looked at Ginny with mild concern and asked,

"Ginny, dear, are you sure you're not just excited about going back to Hogwarts?"

She returned her mother's look with one of bleary eyed disbelief. "Yes, of course, that must be it. Why, I'm positively buoyant with the anticipation of being separated from Harry for the next ten months."

"What the blue blazes are you talking about?" asked Percy in bewilderment. "You and Harry are in the same house - you'll see each other every day!"

"I don't want to *see* Harry," explained Ginny, swiftly reaching the limits of her patience after such a long and tiring night. "What I want is to *sleep* with Harry."

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Naturally, she should have known it would happen. Fred and George immediately latched onto her words like a pair of ravenous Lethifolds. "Ha! You admit it!" cried Fred, pointing an authoritative finger at her. "You only want Harry for his body! You're a scarlet woman, Ginny, scarlet I say!"

****I zink it's time you transfeegured ze cutlery again,**** noted Joan.

I'm in total agreement with you.

George had risen to his feet in order to do something that he probably should not have. With a polished clearing of his throat he began to recite, apparently from memory, the one thing Ginny knew she would never be able to escape.

Ginny would have quite happily given up all the gold in Gringotts, whether it were hers or not, if she could simply evaporate on the spot. Of course, thanks to the power of the Order and Harry's tutoring, she could always Apparate out of the Burrow...

"His eyes are as green as a fresh pickled toad,

His hair is as dark as a blackboard.

I wish he was mine, he's really divine,

The hero who conquered the Dark Lord!"

In the abrupt silence that followed the lyrics, heads turned. Toward George. The silence began to stretch until Harry lowered his forehead to the tabletop, banging down with a soft thud. Percy, sitting beside him, lifted up his glasses and rubbed his fingers over his brow. On Harry's other side, Fred put his chin on his hands and looked across the table at George with a marvelling expression.

"George, my dear twin," he said, "it was nice knowing you. Can I have your styrofoam?"

"You mean 'stereo'," corrected Harry, voice muffled as his head was still down on the table.

Slowly, oh so slowly, Ginny set her knife and fork down on her plate. Scooting her chair back a bit she stood up and turned to face a suddenly pale and trembling George. "I'm going upstairs to unpack," she told him calmly. "I expect you to still be down here when I return."

Molly frowned and asked, "What do you need to unpack for, dear?"

"The short sword Harry gave me for my birthday," she replied with a wicked grin, noticing how

George managed to grow even paler.

~Gin, I don't remember giving you that sword so you could use it to kill your brother,~ observed

Harry, lifting his head up from the table.

Ginny smiled. "Don't worry, Harry. I'm not going to kill him. Just... remove his tongue."

This was more than George could take and a moment later he was fleeing the kitchen post haste, his legs carrying him away as quickly as they could. Ginny and Harry burst into laughter as he sprinted out the door and into the relative safety of the backyard.

Still chuckling, Ginny turned to Harry and said, "I'm going to see if Hermione's awake yet, then I'm going to have a shower."

Harry nodded and resumed devouring his breakfast as Ginny picked up her half-finished coffee and made her way from the kitchen. Sipping happily on the dark, and still hot, liquid she began to climb the stairs, listening as conversation in the kitchen resumed.

"Sometimes," she could hear Fred saying, "it's hard to tell the difference between her bite and her bark."

"No, it's not," Harry immediately replied.

"Oh? How d'you tell the difference?"

Ginny, halfway up the stairs by now, threw an answer over her shoulder. "If he told you, you'd have to hurt him!"

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Harry had come to the conclusion that it was something of a miracle that any of Arthur and Molly Weasley's children had ever managed to get to Hogwarts. Somehow, he had yet to determine how or why, but the Weasley's had honed arriving at King's Cross with only minutes to spare to a fine art.

At least this year their departure was less hurried as there were only four of them rushing for the Hogwarts Express, instead of the six it had been the previous year. For a moment there was darkness and then Harry emerged from the barrier leading to the Muggle portions of the station.

He had to swerve his trolley at the last instant to avoid colliding with a stoic young girl, dressed in morbid clothes that seemed more at home in a funeral parlour and a very energetic young boy, dressed what seemed like a striped Muggle tee-shirt. The pair were watched over by a looming manservant which Harry thought looked rather like a relation to Frankenstein's monster, only without any bolts in his neck.

****I feel an urge to snap my metaphysical fingers.****

Ginny quickly joined him, followed by Ron and Hermione, and together they pushed their trolleys to

the rear carriage of the train. Along their way they were met and greet by their housemates and classmates, all of which seemed very pleased to see them again. None of them were overly surprised to find Neville running around in a frantic state, searching for his toad, Trevor.

Stowing their trunks they hurried to their customary compartment just as the train began to pull out of the station. Leaning out the window, something of a crowd for all four of them, they waved their goodbyes to Mrs Weasley who had accompanied them to platform nine and three-quarters.

"Hey, Potter."

Harry and the others turned at the door to their compartment slid open, revealing Blaise Zabini. The lithe Slytherin girl had let her customary short blonde hair grow out a little over the summer, ending in a short bob just below her ears. She grinned at them, her large blue eyes sparkling with mischief.

"What the devil did you do to Parkinson? The stupid ditz is trying to stick her head through the compartment floor!"

"Ostriches do that," observed Hermione, giving Ginny a disapproving look.

"I thought you said it would wear off in an hour," mentioned Harry, turning to his girlfriend, who was looking inappropriately smug.

Ron, through a fit of giggles, managed to give a reasonable accurate description of events leading to Parkinson's transfiguration. He also, once the laughter and his own guffaws had died down, supplied Blaise with a slightly edited version of the rest of the summer.

Blaise, who remained leaning in the doorway, listened closely. By the end of the tale, her eyes were wide and she was shaking her head in astonishment.

"I see," she turned to Harry. "So... your uncle shot you, then stuffed you in a cupboard. You were then revived by a freak accident, completely destroying the house in the process and your girlfriend here turned Pansy into an ostrich."

Harry nodded his confirmation of her assessment and settle down to watch as Blaise considered it all for a moment. Finally, seeming to quietly give up any attempts at proper understanding the blonde girl asked, "Apart from that, it's been a quiet summer?"

Oh very quiet, commented Beowulf, **Quiet such as only the dead know.**

Unless you're a ghost.

The quartet's journey continued along a similar vein for most to the way to Hogwarts. After Blaise had bid them farewell, they had been visited by Cho Chang, the pretty Ravenclaw Seeker, now going into her seventh and final year, whom Harry had once had a crush on. As of the Yule Ball the previous year she had, though nobody knew how it came about, begun dating Neville.

As she stuck her head into the compartment, Harry grinned. "Let me guess. You're looking for Trevor."

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"How'd you know that?" she asked, puzzled that the four knew what she was doing without her having to tell them.

"Neville loses his toad every other day," explained Hermione.

Half an hour later two fifth-years, Carmen Ryder and Jefferson Hope, come by to say hello. Harry and Hermione had already spoken to them during their brief visit to the Prefect's compartment up front. Carmen and Jefferson were Gryffindor's newest prefects, replacing Angelina Johnson and Maximillian McCoy.

At one point or another during the trip to Hogwarts they were visited by all of the Gryffindor fifth and sixth years, as well as good number of other students. The sky was beginning to darken and the countryside speeding past the window was now familiar. They would soon be arriving at the Hogsmeade station and from there, Hogwarts.

Harry was starting to think that perhaps they would manage to survive the entire journey without being forced into a confrontation with Draco Malfoy. Unfortunately, as often happens, just when he thought this, the door to their compartment was pulled open and a familiar drawl greeted them.

"Ah, Potter. I've been looking for you." Malfoy stood in the doorway, his silvery blonde hair neatly trimmed and his cold grey eyes gleaming with unknown intent. Surprisingly enough he did not look all that different from the last time Harry and the others had seen him.

Oh no. It's the arsehole again.

Can't we ever be free of him?

My luck's good, but not that good, replied Harry.

Malfoy smirked and inclined his head. "I thought you might perhaps be worried about me. So I decided let you know that I'm alive and well."

Harry, making sure that his wand was close at hand, replied, "I'm so sorry to hear that!"

"Where're your bodyguards, Malfoy?" asked Ron, bringing to everyone's attention that the pale faced Slytherin was indeed unattended by his normal companions. Harry reached out with his magic, thinking that perhaps Crabbe and Goyle were merely waiting outside, and was surprised to find that he could not sense either of them anywhere nearby. Ron suddenly smirked and asked in a haughty voice, "Can't you afford them now that daddy's a fugitive?"

"Hardly, Weasel," retorted Malfoy, narrowing his eyes and letting the charming tone in his voice slip away, replaced by a harsh bluntness.

~Harry, are you seeing this?~

He spared Ginny a quick glance and a nod, not wanting to let his attention stray from Malfoy for too long. Something was definitely up. Harry was closely, and as surreptitiously as possible, scrutinising Malfoy's magical aura.

I'm seeing it. Damned if I understand it though, he sent to Ginny, watching as Malfoy's steely grey and

sepia hued aura shimmered and flickered like a coat of low flames.

~If he's a Death Eater,~ Ginny remarked, *~he's certainly hiding it very well.~*

According to the Order it's impossible to change or hide your aura.

It is, confirmed Merlin. **A person or thing's magical signature is a fixed part of them. If you changed the aura you would be changing the object surrounded by it.**

It might be possible to mask it for a time, suggested Osiris, **but only for a few minutes and even short a time would be a great strain on anyone trying it.**

Harry returned his attention to Malfoy, who was engaged in a silent staring contest with Ron. Deciding to try and rattle his nemesis he said, "So, Malfoy, kill anyone over the summer?"

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Malfoy turned his cool gaze away from Ron and towards Harry, his grey eyes glittering, and replied with surprising nonchalance, "Nobody important."

~If he wants somebody important to kill, we can introduce him to Fudge.~

Ginny...

With a short, mocking bow, Malfoy waved a hand and stepped out of their compartment. "I'd best be off. We're nearly at Hogwarts and I still have to change into my robes. Ta ta."

After Malfoy slid the door closed and they listened to his footsteps receding, it was Ginny that spoke up first. "He's got something planned. I can see it in his eyes."

"Yes, well, Malfoy is a cunning sod if nothing else," agreed Hermione, looking at the closed door with a slight frown marring her brow.

"Truth be told, I'm a bit worried," admitted Ron. "The little git didn't even try to properly insult us. Not once! Like Ginny said, something's up with him."

Harry, who was looking out the compartment window, shook his head slightly and said, "It doesn't really matter. Not right now."

With a soft smile tugging at his lips he drew his friends' attention to outside, where they could see that the Hogwarts Express was slowly pulling up to the Hogsmeade station. If they craned their necks and pressed right up against the glass, they could just make out the tall spires and towers of Hogwarts.

"We're back."

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4. Of Balls and Balconies

Peeves was proving to be as annoying as ever, and Harry was sorely tempted to do the poltergeist an injury. The pesky creature had been rather quiet the previous year, aside from his normal routine of molesting the first-years and dropping water balloons on unsuspecting students. Apparently he had decided to make up for lost time and had been waiting for them in the Entrance Hall.

"YEE-HAH-HAH!!!"

Somehow the little bow-tied man had come into the possession of about fifty Billiard-sized metal balls, all polished to a mirror finish and enchanted, probably by Fred and George, to act like very bouncy rubber balls. Naturally, the first thing he did with them was practice his aim as the students entered the castle.

By the time Harry, Ginny, Ron and Hermione got inside the castle from the horseless carriage they had been riding in, total chaos was the best way to describe the scene inside the Entrance Hall.

"WOO-HOO-HOO!!!"

Dozens of the balls were rocketing about the place, smacking into students or bouncing off the walls as bright and shiny blurs. The students were ducking left and right, jumping over each other, as they tried to cross the room and reach the safety of the Great Hall. Peeves was drifting amidst the bedlam, picking up any of the balls that had rolled to a stop and hurling them back into the fray with a demented cackle.

"Now I know what it feels like inside a pinball machine," observed Hermione, hiding behind Ron as a ball shot past, ricocheting off a suit of armour and almost hitting Morag MacDougal on the rebound.

"A what machine?" asked Ron, shielding his face with his arms while at the same time trying to observe the proceedings.

Harry shook his head and waved for his friends to crowd round him. "Never mind that. Let's just try get through this mess. I don't feel like visiting the Hospital Wing on my first day back."

"HAHA-HEHE-HOHO!!!"

They had made it almost halfway across the Entrance Hall, protected by a combined Shield Charm from both Harry and Ginny, when something caught Harry's eye. Or rather someone.

Pansy Parkinson, looking very unkempt at the moment, was slowly bearing down on Peeves. The poltergeist was tossing one of the shiny balls up and down in his hand, delighting in the mayhem he was causing and completely unaware of Pansy's approach. Had he seen the way she was stalking towards him, not to mention the slightly crazed gleam in her eyes, Peeves would maybe have stood a chance. As it was he was blissfully ignorant of what was about to transpire.

With a bizarre spring in her step, Pansy got right up next to Peeves, her demented eyes fixed firmly on the metal globe he was toying with. As she drew alongside him, Peeves spotted her and grinned wickedly at her. His grin swiftly faded as he became aware of her distracted fascination with the ball in his hand.

"Aw... does the ickle girly like the shiny bauble?" he asked, his grin returning as Pansy tilted her head to one side and watched as the polished ball rose up and down in the air. Fast as a cobra she struck, opening her mouth wide and snapping her head forward.

"EEEEEEAAAARRRGH!!! GET HER OFF ME! GET HER OFF ME! GEROFF!!!"

Harry watched, along with his friends, in complete amazement and disbelief as Pansy sank her teeth

into Peeves' hand with all the tenacity of a pit-bull. Peeves had dropped the ball he had been playing with and was desperately trying to pull free, but Pansy had latched onto his palm with a death grip.

"What. The. Fu-" Ron began to ask.

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"She still thinks she's an ostrich," deduced Hermione, cutting her boyfriend off before he said something she would have to make him regret. Watching as Peeves jerked around and around in circles, dragging Pansy with him, she explained, "Ostriches are attracted to shiny objects, just like a magpie."

"LET GO OF ME! GEROFF! LET GO! LEGGO! AAAAAAAAAAHHHHH!!!"

Harry looked from the panicking Peeves to Hermione. "You mean she was trying to get at Peeve's balls? What for, as a snack?"

Hermione shrugged and shook her head. "Looks like it."

Harry turned his attention back to the struggling Peeves, whose attempts to liberate himself from Pansy's clamped jaws were becoming progressively more frantic with each passing second. *Ginny... did you know this was going to happen?*

~No. In fact, I don't have the faintest idea how it happened in the first place.~

Transfiguring a person without a wand sometimes has... interesting side-effects, suggested Isis, although Harry could hear the laughter in her voice.

Interesting. That's one way of putting it.

With a screeching wail, that sounded more fitting for a damned soul than a misfit poltergeist, Peeves took off. Pansy, still biting down on his hand, was lifted into the air with him, rising towards the roof at an alarming rate.

"GEROFF! GEROFF! GEROFF! GEROFF! GEROFF! GEROFF!"

With a thick slurping sound Peeves disappeared through the roof of the Entrance Hall, escaping the clenched jaws of Pansy only because she could not duplicate the feat. For a short instant the Slytherin ostrich, er, girl, hung suspended by the ceiling. Then, no longer supported by Peeves' efforts to escape her, Pansy dropped down like a stone.

"Wha? Oh, shiiiiii..."

Fortunately one of the Ravenclaws, a fifth-year named Raine, had enough presence of mind to cast a quick levitation charm on the falling girl. It was a little late in its execution, but it was enough to slow Pansy's fall enough that she wasn't hurt, although her pride undoubtedly suffered a severe bruising.

"...iiiiit!!!"

With a thump Pansy landed in a heap, her black robes flipped up so that her head was hidden beneath them. Her arms and legs flailed about, causing her robes to flap around her before she managed to free her head and glare murderously at Ginny.

"Weasley! This is all *your* fault!"

Ginny returned Pansy's glare with one of her own. Harry hid a smile as Ginny began to protest her innocence in the matter, managing to sound thoroughly outraged at Pansy's accusation. "My fault? And how pray tell do you think that? *You're* the one that bit Peeves. All we did was stand here and watch."

And perhaps transfigure her into an ostrich yesterday?

~Be quiet, you.~

I didn't say a word.

Not that you need to.

~Be quiet, all of you!~

Parkinson was being helped to her feet by a bewildered-looking Millicent Bulstrode. Once the muchreputed queen-bitch of Slytherin was able to stand up unassisted, she did not bother to attempt any reply, settling for a scathing glare and storming off in a huff.

"Good thing you didn't turn her into a cow," commented Harry as they watch her leave.

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"Why?" asked Ginny, "She's already a cow. The only difference would be if she started eating grass."

Entering the Great Hall and walking in the direction of the Gryffindor table, Harry shook his head and smirked wickedly, "That too."

Perusing the teachers sitting at the staff table as they walked, Harry noted that there were a good number of empty seats waiting to be filled. There was Hagrid's seat, as well as Professor McGonagall's, since both were busy attending to the first-years. Even more interesting was Snape's seat, which was also empty.

There were two unaccountably empty seats, which Harry could only conclude as being for the new Defence Against the Dark Arts professor, who would be replacing Remus Lupin. Although why there were two seats instead of just one, Harry did not know.

A blinding flare of light greeted them as they drew near the Gryffindor table, and Harry had to grit his teeth and force himself to retain his smile. Sitting at the other end of the table, his face half hidden behind his camera, was the ever enthusiastic Colin Creevey. Lowering his camera, Harry's most ardent admirer grinned and waved happily.

"Hey there, Harry!"

"Hi, Colin," Harry replied, dropping into his seat and trying not to roll his eyes. Taking the seat next to him, Ginny ran her hand across his shoulders in commiseration. Before Harry could comment to her about his feelings regarding his adoring fan, Sir Nicholas de Mimsy-Porpington emerged through the middle of the tabletop.

"Salutations, my young friends," he said, smiling broadly as he slowly drifted out of the table.

Hermione answered for all of them, "Hello, Sir Nick. Have a good summer?"

Nick nodded, resulting in his head flopping listlessly to one side. "As good as can be expected my dear. I did have to put up with Peeves' shenanigans the whole while, unfortunately.

The conversation, revolving around the castle's resident poltergeist continued for several minutes, with contributions from Ron, Dean and Neville. By the time Seamus and Moira joined them, it was nearly time for the Sorting ceremony to begin. Everyone quieted down as the colossal oak doors swung open, and Professor McGonagall entered, leading the mass of jumpy looking first-years.

"Were we ever that small?" asked Ron in astonishment, shaking his head as the group of tiny boys and girls trudged past them to stand nervously in front of the staff table.

"I don't know about us," replied Dean, "but Harry certainly was."

Harry was about to retort, but couldn't when Hermione shushed the two boys with a ferocious glare that she could have only learned from Molly Weasley. She managed to shut them up just in time for Professor McGonagall to reverently set the ancient Sorting Hat down on the stool that had been set up on the stage.

The first years looked at the hat, clearly wondering just what they were supposed to do with a decrepit and raggedy old piece of cloth. Harry smiled softly, remembering with perfect clarity his own sorting, so many years ago. After several long and quiet moments passed, during which the first years shifted about nervously, the Sorting Hat's brim opened and it began to sing.

~Hickory dickory bat,

There once was a Hogwarts Sorting Hat.~

Harry blinked in consternation and turned to gawk at Ginny, who was sitting next to him and watching the sorting with an expression of such angelic innocence that Harry almost started laughing.

~It's a ragged piece of cloth,

And it doesn't have a name,

But that doesn't matter,

Because your future's its game...~

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Swallowing his hilarity, Harry turned back to watch as the Sorting Hat sang. Everyone else in the Great Hall was listening raptly, but Harry's was so distracted by Ginny's own silent song that he did not hear a word the Sorting Hat uttered.

~There is no need to fear,

For the Sorting Hat will find,

What place, what house to put you in,

It's all inside your mind...~

It was a struggle to keep his features from contorting into an idiotic smile, but somehow Harry managed. Out the corner of his eye he could see Ginny watching him, the ghost of a sly smile traced upon her cerise coloured lips, as she silently sang her own lyrics to him.

~For those that are brave at heart,

Gryffindor's where you'll be,

You can outfight, out-swear and out-drink anyone,

Including the likes of me!~

When the various members of the Order of the Phoenix started to join in, singing very off key, it was all Harry could do not to drop his face into his hands and start howling with laughter.

****When you're diligent and loyal,***

Then a Hufflepuff you surely are,

There'll be blood, sweat and toil,

While you follow your star...*

If possible it actually got worse when some of the more heavily accented voices joined together in an incomprehensible cacophony. It reminded Harry of a noisy breakfast in the Dursley house, with Vernon bellowing, Petunia screeching and Dudley braying all at once.

****If you value knowledge above all else,***

Then Ravenclaw's where you'll be set,

Learning things both great and small,

That's a sure bet...*

The last verse was delivered solely by Ginny, who was now sporting an impish grin as she sidled up against Harry at the table. Careful not to draw anyone's attention she slipped her hand into his and gave a squeeze, causing him to look into her twinkling coffee brown eyes.

~For slimy gits that like to sneak,

Slytherin shall be your home,

'Cause you're horrid little buggers,

And are rotten to the bone!~

Once the song was over and the Sorting Hat, as well as Ginny, fell silent a round of applause was given by all in the hall, more perfunctory than anything else. Not that anyone would admit it. The only true exception this time was Harry, who lavished silent praise upon Ginny, who graced him with a regal nod as the ovation tapered off.

Professor McGonagall moved from her place at the side and stood tall next to the four-legged stool and that Sorting Hat. From within her robes she produced a long roll of parchment, which she held before her as she spoke.

"When I call your name, you will put on the hat and sit on the stool to be sorted," she said, peering at the queasy looking first-years over the rims of her glasses. "Ambrose, Nicholas!"

As the sorting continued, Harry turned to Ginny and shook his head. "Circe's liver, Gin, you almost

made me split my sides laughing during the song."

Ginny smiled and leaned in to quickly kiss his cheek. "Unfortunately I can't take any credit for it. The entire song was Fred and George's work."

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I'm surprised they didn't dare you to do something stupid - like charm the Sorting Hat to sing that instead of what it was supposed to.

~They tried,~ admitted Ginny, watching as 'Debenham, Mary' became the first new Gryffindor. The diminutive brown haired girl joined the table to a round of applause as Ginny continued,

~Unfortunately we couldn't work out how to get to the hat before McGonagall brought it out.~

"You're incorrigible," concluded Harry.

"You wouldn't have me any other way, would you?"

"Never."

"Endean, Richard!" called McGonagall.

"HUFFLEPUFF!"

"Fargo, Amber!"

"SLYTHERIN!"

This continued for some time, McGonagall calling out names, the Sorting Hat calling out houses.

Harry dutifully applauded as each new Gryffindor was chosen and happily greeted the relieved children as they joined them at the table. Midway through the sorting he glanced across the Great Hall and saw that Malfoy was watching him with hooded eyes, a thin smile on his lips. It was an unnerving occurrence, though Harry did not point it out to the others.

Eventually McGonagall finished reading through the list of new students, ending with 'Zulberg,

Trevor'. After the deputy headmistress packed away the stool and the Sorting Hat, Professor

Dumbledore rose from his seat to give his beginning of year speech.

"Greetings one and all," he intoned pleasantly, looking over the assembled students with a benevolent smile. "It is always a pleasure to see so many old faces, as well as so many new ones, at the start of yet another year of learning. I have a few start of term notices to make before we commence with the wonderful banquet that has been prepared for us."

Harry laughed softly as he noticed Ron's grimace. His friend would much rather have dug into his food first and then listened to the announcements. Considering that Ron had somehow managed to grow another couple of inches and fill out a good bit as well, Harry could understand his slight impatience to begin eating.

"Firstly, since it has proved so popular these last two years, Hogwarts will once again be hosting a Yule Ball during the Christmas holidays. Unlike previous years, however, this year the ball shall be held on Christmas *Eve*, rather than Christmas *Day*."

"Oh joy," groaned Harry, slumping in his seat.

"What's wrong, Harry?" asked Ginny, looking at him with concern.

Harry sighed. "Considering what happened at the last Yule Ball - I'm really not feeling all that enthusiastic for the event."

Ginny smiled sadly and took his hand in hers. "It'll be all right, Harry. I mean, what are the odds that Tom will attack on Christmas two years in a row?"

D'you really want me to answer that?

"As always," continued Dumbledore, after waiting for the news about the ball to sink in, "I must inform you that the Forbidden Forest is just that, forbidden to all students. The neighbouring village of Hogsmeade is likewise out of bounds to those under third year."

This time, for some inexplicable reason, the headmaster turned his sparkling blue eyes towards Harry. Harry, knowing full well why, grinned back and shrugged.

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"Finally I would like to announce two, three actually, changes to our staff this year. Professor Jones, who has retired to work on a dig in Egypt, has been replaced as our Professor of Ancient Runes, by Miss Fleur Delacour."

A tumultuous standing ovation came from the students. Actually, truth be told, it was a standing ovation that came from most of the male students. Only Harry, Ron and a few other prudent young men, remained seated and restrained themselves to a polite applause – thus earning themselves pleased smiles from their significant others. Fleur, as beautiful as always, gracefully rose from her seat and graced the students with a charming smile and a wave.

Harry, taking a quick look at the Slytherin table, noticed that Malfoy was completely unaffected by Fleur's Veela charms. In fact, and this highly disturbed Harry, he seemed to scarcely moved since the last time Harry had seen him. His cold grey eyes were unwaveringly focused on Harry alone.

"With Professor Lupin deciding to leave us for a sabbatical, the position of our Defence Against the Dark Arts has been filled this year by a married couple, Gregory and Hilary Proteus, who come to us highly recommended," Dumbledore's moustache gave a twitch of amusement. "I have been informed that they have only just arrived in Hogsmeade and are currently being escorted to the castle by Professor Snape."

"Is he off his rocker?" asked Ron. "Snape will probably kill them before they even reach the school grounds."

"I have discovered over the years that it is very easy to be wise. All you have to do is; think of something stupid to say and merely say the opposite." Dumbledore grinned boyishly at them all and lifted his goblet in a toast. "That said, let's dig in!"

Food immediately sprang into being on the table. All of Harry's favourite dishes were there; roast beef

and chicken, lamb chops and sausages, steaks and ribs, roast potatoes and chips, several kinds of fish, mounds of crisp veggies and, as with every meal for some unfathomable explanation, mint humbugs. Harry suspected that this was probably Dumbledore's work, but had yet to find any proof.

Everyone immediately set about following Dumbledore's advice and did indeed dig in, piling food onto their plates. Harry watched with some amusement as Ron almost vanished from view behind the mountain of food he stacked in front of himself. The damndest thing was that the ever-growing redhead would probably finish it all before anyone else did. And then, no doubt, he would start consuming a second helping and after that probably a third as well.

"Good food, good meat, good God, let's eat!" declared Moira enthusiastically, attacking her dinner with a relish that could almost have matched Ron's. In fact her gusto was probably more impressive since Moira was, despite being in her third year, easily one of the smallest people at the table, including the first years.

"Where do they put it all?" asked Hermione, looking from Ron to Moira and back in amazement.

Harry shook his head. "I think they must have swallowed bottomless pits when they were younger."

A couple of minutes later the doors to the Great Hall swung open. Professor Snape was standing at the threshold. He had the air of a man who had been in an tremendous hurry, but who had been stopped in midrush by something, or someone, he could not fully understand.

"The new Defence Against the Dark Arts professors have arrived, Headmaster," he said after taking a moment to visibly compose himself. The look on his face was, oddly enough, not the one of glaring abhorrence that he usually held in reserve for whoever drew the position. In its place he wore a look that was almost dazed, perhaps even traumatised.

Everyone was watching closely as the two newcomers crossed the threshold into the hall, brushing past Snape without sparing him so much as a sideways glance. They were so engrossed in their conversation, spoken just loud enough for everyone to hear, that they did not notice the reaction their entrance caused.

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Waving her arms about in obvious agitation was a stately young woman with shimmering golden hair and bright hazel eyes. From what Dumbledore had said this could only be Hilary Proteus, who was ranting at the man who was clearly her husband, "-believe you're still going on about that one little mistake-"

"Mistake?! Little?!" interrupted Gregory Proteus, staring incredulously at his wife with wide, seagreen eyes. He ran both hands through his rich, yet untidy, mahogany hair and exclaimed, "You threw me off the hotel balcony!"

"At least there was a pool below..." offered Hilary, looking slightly chagrined.

"You didn't know that!"

"It was an accident!" insisted the flustered woman.

Gregory gave her a fierce look, "An accident?! We were on the *seventeenth* floor!"

Hilary protested in defence, "I was drunk on champagne - what did you expect?"

"It was the fourth day of our honeymoon. I know what I was expecting." He held up a finger and wagged it at her in a negative manner. "That wasn't it."

A blush rose to the woman's cheeks, visible even from where Harry was sitting. She shook her head and replied, "At least you weren't hurt."

"Hotel security arrested me!"

Everyone present in the Great Hall, teachers, students and ghosts, was watching the two quarrelling with dreadful fascination. Surprise wasn't sufficient to describe the reactions of those watching. Astonishment would only just fit the bill. Total consternation came close.

"I made it up to you, didn't I?"

"Made it up?!" now it was Gregory's turn to wave his arms about as he all but shouted, "I had to sleep on my stomach for a week! The doctor thought I'd been ravaged by a wild beast!"

She smirked at his words and arched an eyebrow at him and shook out her golden mane before noting in a superior voice, "You didn't complain at the time."

The broad shouldered man abruptly skidded to a halt. He blinked and for the first time seemed to perceive that they were not alone. Glancing to either side he took note of the dumbstruck students that were sitting all around them. Finally he looked at his wife and said, with perfect calm, "You do realise that we have a rather sizable audience."

Hilary's jaw dropped and she glanced around the hall. Her face, tanned as it was, managed to pale a good few shades. Turning back to Gregory she drew in a shaky breath before speaking in a small voice. "I guess I went and stepped in it."

"That's a fair assessment," agreed Gregory, smiling thinly.

"Dammit, I swore I wouldn't do this."

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5. A House of Cards

Chaos reigned supreme throughout Gryffindor Tower on the second of September. It was the first day of the school term and, much to their horror, the Gryffindors had woken to discover that they had lost two items of great importance.

Harry and Ginny.

It started innocently enough, early that same morning, when Hermione was roused from her sleep by the first rays of the morning sun. The bushy-haired sixth-year Prefect rolled out of her plush fourposter bed and pulled on her faded pink dressing-gown and fluffy slippers. Treading quietly, so that she would not disturb Lavender or Parvati, Hermione slipped out of the room.

Hermione was heading for the dormitory belonging to the fifth-year girls, her intention being to check on Ginny Weasley. Though they hadn't really discussed it, Hermione knew that Ginny and Harry had not managed to catch much sleep the night before leaving the Burrow. Naturally she was worried that her friend had experienced similar difficulties last night.

Normally Hermione would not have worried about either of the two doing anything inappropriate. Harry was a sensible young man and Ginny, despite her brothers' dubious influences, had her head properly screwed on. Of course, if you looked at it another way, Harry was dangerously impulsive and had a tendency to act, then think; and Ginny was easily a match for any of her brothers and that, unfortunately, included the twins.

Besides which, she thought as she slipped into the other girls' dormitory, they're in love. Who knows what they could decide to get up to.

Ginny's bed was, luckily, close to the door. Hermione padded across the short distance from the door to the curtain-enshrouded bed. She felt about the velvety fabric for a few seconds until she found an edge and cautiously parted the curtains, just enough for a short glimpse inside.

Immediately following her short glimpse, Hermione grabbed hold of the curtains with both hands. She threw them wide open, exposing the bed hidden within, her expression becoming an odd mixture of worry, consternation and disapproval as she looked down on Ginny's bed.

It was empty.

Heck, it hadn't even been slept in.

"Oh boy," was all she could manage to say as she stared down at the undisturbed covers. It did not take a genius, which Hermione was (she had the O.W.L. certificate to prove it), to guess that if Ginny was not in her bed, then it was almost a certainty that she was to found in Harry's bed instead.

She wouldn't, Hermione tried to convince herself. Not while there were four other boys in the room with them.

Not that much later, less than a minute actually, Hermione was sneaking into the sixth-year boys' dormitory. She had been in the room on one or two occasions in the past, but never with such a purpose in mind.

With far more caution than she had displayed in the fifth-year girls' dormitory, Hermione sneaked across the room towards Harry's bed. As she approached the curtained bed, she wondered just what she would say if her suspicions were founded. After all, this was not a situation Hermione had ever thought she would find herself in.

Besides which, Harry and Ginny were her friends. Close friends. While she could not claim to fully understand the reasons why they needed to sleep together, Hermione knew that there was more to it than simple teenage hormones run amok. However Hermione was a Prefect, as was Harry for that matter, and she could not just ignore such a flagrant disregard for the school rules.

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Well, not entirely anyway, she admitted as she reached up and took hold of the curtains. Carefully, so as not to disturb any of the other four occupants of the room, Hermione parted the curtains and found herself completely at a loss as she stared at Harry's bed.

It was empty.

Heck, it hadn't even been slept in.

Hermione took a deep breath. Let it out. She took another deep breath. Held it. Held it some more.

After a beat she let it out in a protracted sigh.

"Don't panic," she told herself. Looking around the shadowy dormitory, Hermione again tried to convince herself: "Just because neither of them are here, doesn't mean anything's happened to them.

They probably just went out for a walk around the lake."

At the crack of dawn? And without having even tried their beds?

The panic Hermione was trying so valiantly to resist began to set in at about this point. Without really thinking about it, she stumbled across the room, tripping over what looked like Neville's shoes, and pulled open the curtains surrounding Ron's bed.

"Ron! Wake up! Wake up, Ron!" she shouted, grabbing the softly snoring boy by the shoulder and giving him a rousing shake. When Ron proved a trifle too slow to wake for her liking, Hermione grabbed him by both shoulders and almost hauled him out of his bed, shouting, "WAKE UP! Harry's missing! Ginny's missing! They're both *MISSING*!!"

"Wha? Who? Whe? Huh? Wassit?" Ron looked up at Hermione with bleary eyes, clearly not fully comprehending what she was saying.

Hermione resisted the urge to slap him a few times, settling for wrenching him back and forth to the point where he became a red-haired blur. As he struggled against her grasp, finally jolted awake from his slumber, she continued to yell, "HARRY AND GINNY ARE MISSING!!"

"What? Hermione? Are you sure?" he asked, looking at her in bewilderment.

"They're not in their beds! Harry's not in Ginny's bed and Ginny isn't in Harry's bed!"

The details of the situation began to seep into Ron's befuddled brain, not to mention the minds of Dean, Seamus and Neville, who had also been roused by Hermione's shouting. Being the mature and sensible young men that they were, naturally they perceived Hermione's aura of full-blown panic and immediately began to enter a comparable state.

The search for Harry Potter and Ginny Weasley began.

Had anyone paused to take a proper look around, they might have noticed two heads, one topped with red, the other topped with black, peering over the back of a couch in the common room. The young man and woman whose heads these were, watched the disorganised hunt for Harry and Ginny with wry, bemused smiles.

"Think we should let them know we're here?" asked Harry, stifling a laugh as a blushing Neville scurried down the staircase leading to the girls' dormitories. Obviously he had caught an earful from some of the girls, or perhaps even an eyeful.

"Not yet," replied Ginny with a rascally smile. She looked at Harry with a twinkle in her deep brown eyes, feeling playful in spite of her lack of sleep that night.

They listened for a time to the sound of people yelling and calling their names, accompanied by doors swinging open or being slammed shut. All in all, the search was something of a commotion, especially since it was completely unnecessary.

All this fuss when we're right in front of them, she thought. *I guess it's true what they say about hiding in plain sight.*

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Sudden awareness of pressure against her one leg drew Ginny's attention away from the activities behind them and down in front of where she was sitting. Harry, for a similar reason, also looked at the foot of the couch, where Carmen's pet Kneazle, Quagga, was rubbing his sleek black and silver striped body against Ginny's calf. Likewise, Harry was receiving attention from the mass of fluffy orange fur that was Crookshanks, Hermione's cat.

"Oh, joy," groaned Harry as Crookshanks sprang up onto his lap, "I've got to talk Hermione into putting this cat of hers on a diet."

"He's just a cat, Harry," replied Ginny, leaning over to lift Quagga up. "How heavy could he be?"

"Want to swap and find out?"

Ginny's retort was quashed by an inopportune yawn. As Quagga settled himself down, twisting about until he was comfortable, she decided to change the topic and state the obvious. "We need to find a way to sleep together."

****You had better pray nobody passing by hears you talking like that.****

****Yes, what a scandal. The two most powerful magicians on the planet engaged in an illicit affair? It would be a feeding frenzy for the media.****

Harry nodded in agreement to Ginny's statement, ignoring the ramblings of the Order. His head drooped a bit as he stroked a hand up and down Crookshanks' back. "Either that or spend the rest of the year in the common room like this."

"Maybe we should talk to Dumbledore..." she suggested, "see if he can't arrange a special dispensation."

"I don't want to go through a discussion like the one we had with your mother again," resisted Harry, clearly remembering the grilling Ginny's mum had subjected them to. It had almost been as bad as having to try and explain how they had ended up in bed together completely starkers.

She mulled it over for a time. "Maybe we can get Mum to write him a letter explaining it all..."

"D'you remember the trouble we had convincing her to let us sleep together at the Burrow?" asked

Harry, arching his eyebrows at her. He shifted where he sat, wincing as Crookshanks' needle sharp claws dug into his legs. "What makes you think we can convince her to let us do the same here?"

"Then what can we do?" Ginny was aware of the desperation that was beginning to seep into her voice. She could remember in perfect detail how fatigued she had felt those first few days of the summer when she and Harry had not been sharing a bed. She didn't think she would be able to endure such an arduous experience again, not when the alternative was spending the nights in Harry's loving embrace.

Harry took a deep breath and slowly let it out, absentmindedly stroking Crookshanks behind his ears, resulting in a deep and resonating purr from the large feline. After several long moments of reflection he seemed to almost perk up. He half-turned to Ginny and said, "How about we Apparate to the Burrow every night? We could even ask Dumbledore for a refund on our school fees, since we won't be needing room and board here anymore."

Ginny blinked in surprise and mulled over the idea. After a while she nodded her head in halfcommittal approval, "Brilliant idea, but there are a few problems that I can see."

"Yeah," agreed Harry, smiling half-heartedly, "namely what happens if Voldemort attacks in the middle of the night and we're not here?"

Further suggestions as to a solution to their problem were put on hold when the, until then, relative quiet of the common room was shattered by a cacophony of voices descending the staircases.

Apparently, having finished their search of the various dormitories, the students were now mobilizing for a search of the castle and its grounds.

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It appeared, from what Ginny could discern through the noise, that the earlier pandemonium had only been a forerunner. Ginny and Harry's fellow Gryffindors were working themselves into a state of mild to extreme panic. A fact that both of the 'missing' teenagers found quite amusing.

Hermione was pacing back and forth, her head ducked down in concentration and her bushy hair all over the place, and trying to deduce likely spots to search for the 'missing' couple. Ron, seldom one to keep his head in a crisis, was rambling about having to write to his and Ginny's mum and dad, letting them know that he had somehow managed to lose his baby sister.

Neville was apologising copiously to Moira and Seamus, confirming that he had indeed caught an eyeful. Moira was grumbling loudly in what sounded like Gaelic, while Seamus' Irish twang had deepened to the point where he was almost as unintelligible as his Beater girlfriend.

I think maybe we should let them know we're here now, Ginny silently told Harry as the noise level in the common room approached that of a post-Quidditch-match victory celebration.

~Y'know,~ he replied, checking the watch Ginny had given him for Christmas, *~Even if I had Quidditch practice I wouldn't be getting up for another eight or nine minutes.~*
Perhaps... Ginny felt a devious scheme beginning to form in the back of her mind. A grin that most people would normally associate with Fred and George lit up her face, *That would be perfect actually.*
~How's that?~
We can Apparate down to the Quidditch pitch and pretend we got up for an early morning fly around.
~Without our brooms?~ asked Harry, pointing out what he saw as a hole in her plan.
Have you forgotten how you got around that dragon during the Triwizard Tournament? She asked, cocking an eyebrow at him. *We can summon them. Nobody will be any the wiser.*
"What's going on here?"

Professor McGonagall, wearing her tartan dressing-gown, had arrived to investigate the noise, thus succeeding in bringing silence to the room. Only for a moment though as, after that moment passed, everyone present began trying to explain all at once. Naturally the resulting flood of worried voices was a completely incomprehensible babble that McGonagall, not surprisingly, seemed unable to make heads or tails of.

"Quiet!" McGonagall held up a hand, signalling the students to shut up.
After a hush finally settled over the anxious Gryffindors, the deputy headmistress surveyed her charges with a sharp eye. Finally she turned to the until-now-unnoticed couch in front of the fire. Folding her arms across her chest she looked on with an impatient expression and asked, "Mr Potter, Ms Weasley, since the two of you seem the calmest, perhaps you would be so kind as to explain what this racket is about?"

Ginny and Harry popped their heads up from behind the couch, much to the total amazement and disbelief of those searching for them. The two teenagers looked from their gawking housemates to their stern-looking head of house then each other. With a shrug they turned back to McGonagall and chimed in unison, "Don't have a clue, Professor."

Ron was watching with a mixture of amusement and concern as Harry's head drooped lower and lower as the lesson wore on. From what Harry and Ginny had told Hermione and him, during breakfast, his best friend and sister had now gone nearly two days without sleep. As a result Harry had been dozing on and off throughout all their classes that day, slowly falling forward until he would jerk up again in an attempt to remain awake. Ron was willing to bet that Ginny was in much the same condition.

If anyone had told me this time last year, he thought, that Harry and Ginny wouldn't be able to sleep unless they were in the same bed; I've told them to check into St. Mungos.

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Normally falling asleep in class would not have been that bad a thing. Most of the teachers would probably have understood what Harry was going through. Or, in the case of the ghostly Professor Binns, not have even noticed Harry's lack of attention in their class. Fortunately they were currently in the last class of the day, so Harry wouldn't have to worry about it much longer, not that he appeared to be anyway.

Unfortunately their last class of the day was Potions.

Dean Thomas, partnered with Seamus Finnigan, was sitting on Harry's other side. After Harry made another jerky attempt to remain cognisant during the class, the dark-skinned boy leaned over and Ron heard him whisper, "You should try exercising Harry. A healthy lifestyle will help you no end."

Harry gave Dean a groggy look and replied, "I'm so tired already exercise hardly seems necessary..."

Smiling at his friend's lacklustre response, Ron turned his attention back to Snape, who was writing out a long list of potion ingredients and instructions on the blackboard. The Potions Master had his back to the class, luckily for Harry, and had missed the brief exchange as well as Harry's close call.

Good thing too, he thought, copying down the instruction in his messy scrawl, slimy git would probably leap at the chance to give Harry grief. He certainly gave Ginny enough before lunch.

This was a fairly accurate observation on Ron's part. Everyone who had been ill-fated enough to have Potions that day had remarked on Snape's black mood. Apparently he had recovered from his encounter with Gregory and Hilary Proteus and had settled into a vindictive state that rivalled anything he had produced previously.

Nobody had been able to garner any details, but from what was being discussed on the student grapevine, the married couple were relentlessly teasing the Potions Master. For some reason the Defence Against the Dark Arts professors found endless amusement in causing Snape grief of one sort or another.

Everyone he had spoken to that had already attended Defence Against the Dark Arts were verbose in their praise of the two professors, comparing them favourably with Remus Lupin. Even though he would not be having a class with them until the following day, Ron had decided that he liked the Professors Proteus. *After all, he reasoned, anyone who makes Snape's life as miserable as he makes ours has to be good.*

"I want you all to take special note of this, you in particular Longbottom," Snape motioned at one line of his instructions. "You must add *precisely* two and a quarter fluid ounces of dragon blood to the sifted blackmoor. Any more than that and the results will be dire for the fool that fails to follow my directions."

THUD!

Snape had just opened his mouth to speak again when he was interrupted by the sound. He closed his mouth and narrowed his eyes, scanning the class for the source. Considering his mood, it was likely that whoever, or whatever, it was would regret having disturbed Snape's lecture.

Ron, who was sitting next to the source, glanced nervously at Harry. Exhaustion had apparently won out and Harry's head had dropped to the bench, connecting with a solid thump. Despite the force of the impact Harry somehow remained completely out of it. Ron gave his friend a sharp nudge with his elbow in an attempt to wake him up before Snape spotted him, but Harry's only response was a muffled grunt of discomfort.

Come on, you git! Wake up!

"What was that?" Snape ground out in a dangerous tone. His black eyes swivelled to where Pansy Parkinson, hand raised into the air, was sitting. "Parkinson?"

"Potter, sir," explained Pansy, indicating where Harry was sitting.

That bitch. Ginny should've turned her into dog instead of an ostrich.

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Snape's eyes narrowed to thin slits and a dangerous smile creased his lips. Slowly he began to stalk towards Ron and the unconscious Harry. "Thank you, Ms Parkinson. Three points to Slytherin."

Ron swallowed nervously as Snape came to a stop beside him, his robes billowing around him and seeming to make the pallid man even larger. Licking his lips in preparation Ron looked up at the looming professor and tried to explain, "Er... Harry hasn't been sleeping well, Professor."

"He seems to be sleeping perfectly well right now, Weasley," snapped the professor, arching an eyebrow with satisfaction as he look at Harry's slumped form. His eyes were sparkling with the anticipation of reprimanding his most despised student. "I think it's time we woke Mr Potter up so that he can face the consequences of not paying attention in my class."

"That's a bad idea," Ron blurted out, not really thinking about it. His memories of what happened back home at the Burrow when anyone barged in on a sleeping Harry or Ginny had surfaced full force and prompted him to speak. He could feel his palms sweating as he tried not to wilt under Snape's glare and explained, "Harry gets startled easily when he's asleep."

Snape smiled nastily. "Then he should wake up all the more readily."

Without giving Ron any more time to try and warn him off, Snape reached past Ron with his wand and cracked it firmly against the back of Harry's head.

"GAAAAH!" Harry woke with a jerk and a surprised yelp. He pushed up and away from the desk, teetering unsteadily on his stool for a second, his eyes wide and unfocused.

With a soft pop, Harry disappeared.

Snape blinked in surprise.

With a soft pop, Harry reappeared.

"HEEYAH!" Harry was immediately behind Snape, as well as several feet straight up. He dropped upon the startled Potions Master much like a bird of prey would swoop down on a rabbit. The outcome was much the same as well and resulted in Snape spending the night in the Hospital Wing.

"I can't believe it," groaned Hermione. "Our first day back and you've already *attacked* one of the teachers."

"He startled me!" Harry tried to explain for the umpteenth time. He had just come from a meeting in Dumbledore's office and had met up with Ron and Hermione outside the Great Hall. They were walking towards the Gryffindor table, Hermione running a rampant commentary concerning Harry's earlier actions in Potions class.

"You broke his collarbone!"

Ron leaped to his friend's defence. "He deserved it!"

Harry was immensely relieved when they reached the table, hoping the presence of so much food would distract his friends from arguing. He sat down in the seat opposite Ginny, who was talking with Genevieve, a generously endowed fellow fifth-year with dark brown hair and liquid russet-coloured eyes. As they chatted away Harry spotted that the Ravenclaw girl had for some reason dyed her fringe and several locks of her hair raven black.

"What was the verdict, mate?" asked Seamus, who as sitting nearby with Moira, as Harry started filling his plate with food.

"Thirty points from Gryffindor," he replied with a sigh. Thirty points on the first day back was certainly a record, even for Harry. He sighed again as he considered the second part of his punishment.

"And detention with Snape for the rest of the month."

Ginny, who had finished talking with Genevieve, looked at him in dismay. "That's terrible. They can't be serious! How can they give you detention with Snape after you put him in the Hospital Wing?"

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Harry shrugged and sipped some pumpkin juice. "Dumbledore seems to think it will calm him down a bit. Apparently Madam Pomfrey had to put a Silencing Charm around his bed - they could hear him yelling for my expulsion from the Library."

~And what about the other thing?~ Ginny asked quietly, biting into a Yorkshire pudding.

Nothing firm yet, he replied, setting down his drink and looking across the table at her.

His mind immediately began to replay the short discussion about his and Ginny's sleeping habits that he and the teachers had had. Dumbledore had assembled the three other heads of the houses, since Snape was still in the infirmary. McGonagall, Flitwick and Sprout had been sitting in the chairs arrayed in front of the headmaster's desk as Harry tried to explain.

"Very well, Potter," McGonagall had insisted, "we understand that you assaulted Professor Snape because you were tired. We understand that you were tired because you were unable to sleep last night. However we do *not* understand, since you still haven't explained it to us, *why* you were unable to get to sleep."

Harry clearly remembered the embarrassment he'd felt and the scalding blush that had tainted his cheeks when he had answered, "I couldn't get to sleep... because Ginny Weasley wasn't in the bed with me."

Looking back on it, the various reactions had been quite amusing. Dumbledore, who had probably had an inkling of the truth already, merely smiled in that benevolent and grandfatherly way he had. McGonagall had openly gaped at Harry, her square glasses slipping off her nose and clattering to the floor. Flitwick, who had been sitting right on the edge of his seat, had fallen out of his chair and landed next to McGonagall's glasses. Sprout had promptly begun to choke on her tea, which she'd spilt over her lap in the process.

Dumbledore said he'd take it under consideration, Harry judiciously summed up, until he makes a decision, we're to stay in our own beds. He's also arranged for Madam Pomfrey to supply us with dreamless sleep potion for the time being. Hopefully he will have an answer for us, or a solution, by the end of the week.

Ginny nodded her understanding and smiled at him in commiseration. They continued their meal audibly for the most part, for the benefit of their friends, and soon that entire section of the table was roaring with laughter over Snape's 'accident' in Potions. Neville in particular seemed to enjoy recounting what had happened to his least favourite teacher. Everyone agreed with Dean that the only way could have been better was if Colin had been there to take a photograph.

Finally dinner drew to an end as everyone got up and made their way to the third floor corridor which led down to the Practical Fighting Techniques auditorium. There were a good many more students than had been attending the previous year. This was in part because of Voldemort's attack on the school, which had convinced anyone who had doubted his return. Then there was the fact that Dumbledore had approved the addition of third-year students to the class roster, much to young Moira Mackay's delight.

Descending the winding staircase that led from what Harry had come to think of as Fluffy's room, the students filed into the auditorium. As they found their seats, Harry noticed the two Defence Against the Dark Arts professors standing off in one shadowy corner. From the look of things they had decided to come and see Harry's somewhat controversial class firsthand.

~What do you make of that?~ Ginny asked him.

What d'you mean? he asked, looking away from the Proteuses.

Ginny, walking alongside him as they made their way down the aisle, nodded her head in the general direction of the two adults, *~Look at their auras. Very bright.~*

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Harry drew a short breath, closed his eyes and began to concentrate on the magic surrounding him. He focused on bring his perceptions of it to the forefront of his being and then released his breath and opened his eyes. Next to him he could see Ginny's aura glowing a brilliant white, red and gold - identical to his own, the aura of someone joined to the Order of the Phoenix.

It wasn't difficult to see why the new professors had garnered Ginny's attention. Both husband and wife had auras that glowed and swirled brightly, almost equal to Harry and Ginny's auras. Gregory Proteus' aura was a blazing gold that shone around him like a small sun, flecked with traces of red and white. His wife, Hilary, was surrounded by fiery scarlet and crimson, which in a complement to Gregory, was spotted with flecks of gold and white.

A very powerful couple, noted Harry, leading Ginny onto the stage and to his desk, which was set to one side.

~I think they're even brighter than Dumbledore,~ thought Ginny, her attention alternating between the two professors.

Harry placed a hand on her shoulder, gently chiding her for staring so much, and then stepped out to the centre of the stage. A lecturing podium rose from the floor in front of him as quiet settled over the waiting students.

"First off," Harry began, "I'd like to welcome all those who are joining us for the first time. Mostly last year's second and third years. I know most of you are a little nervous about being here, although some of you are a bit eager." He shot a glance at Moira, who grinned broadly at him and gave him a thumbs up. He shook his head and continued, "Rest assured though, this class is *not* as bad as the older students have made out."

"Aye," called a voice from the back of the room, "it's worse!"

His light-hearted welcome address continued for several minutes, with Harry touching on a few points here and there as well as giving his students a basic idea of what he was planning to cover over the course of the year. His final announcement, that Ginny would be joining him as an assistant in the class, was met with loud applause from the Gryffindors.

"So," Harry clapped his hands and rubbed them together with anticipation, "any suggestions on how to start the year off?"

"How about a duel, Potter?"

All eyes turned to the source of the voice that had called out the challenge. Malfoy's drawl was as cocksure and confident as it had ever been. A faint smile twisted his thin lips and his cold grey eyes seemed to shine brightly in the auditorium's subdued lighting.

"How about it, Potter?" he asked, standing up and striding down to the edge of the stage, "Another demonstrations, just like last year." His walk was more of a sauntering swagger that almost instantly put Harry's senses on alert. There was something different about Malfoy now, something very different from when they had encountered each other on the Hogwarts Express the previous day. Malfoy seemed... taller, somehow. It was impossible, Harry knew, but he seemed to be holding

himself... taller. That posture, the dangerous glimmer in his slitted grey eyes and his almost feral smile, was enough to let Harry know that the other boy had something up his sleeves. Something highly dangerous no doubt.

Harry nodded in agreement.

"All right, Malfoy," he said, waving for him to take a position on the stage, "let's see if we can provide a good show."

The thing about Shield Charms is that they can block pretty much anything. All that is required are reasonable amounts of focus, concentration and power. This naturally meant that Harry's Shield Charm was nigh impenetrable, for he had focus, concentration and nobody could dispute the raw power he was practically swimming in.

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Something as simple and generally inoffensive as a Banishing Charm should never have been able to penetrate his shield. Thus it was quite understandable that Harry was more than a little surprised when he was unexpectedly knocked off his feet and sent flying through the air, a loud crack accompanying his short flight.

Gin, I think we have a problem, he noted while rolling to his feet, a good twenty or thirty feet back from where he had been standing.

~What is it?~ asked Ginny in an alarmed tone.

Harry grit his teeth as he rose up, pressing his one arm against the throbbing in his chest, *I think Malfoy just broke my ribs...*

Ginny's response was a loud and disbelieving, *~What?! That's impossible!~*

I know. He did it anyway.

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6. The Shadow of a Storm

It was a disturbing sight that greeted Harry as he looked up from where he was kneeling. He had only ever seen a person's aura change once before. It had been that time, almost exactly a year ago in fact, when he had decided to share his custodianship of the Order of the Phoenix with Ginny.

Her aura had at first been a shimmering glow of soft reds and oranges, accompanied by a low hum, almost a catlike purr. It had suited her, as most people's auras did, giving off a sense of who she truly was.

He had watched with interest and wonder as flecks of gold and pure white sparked into being around Ginny, glittering like a rain of stars that had grown stronger and stronger until it was part of the blazing fire that surrounded her. The soft orange tinge to her brightening aura had slowly faded away as the colours became predominantly white and gold and scarlet.

The deep thrum that Ginny's magic gave off had begun to twist and lighten, rising in pitch until it could almost be felt as well as heard. It sounded like phoenix song and it had permeated her magic with harmonious calm.

It had been a wonderful thing to witness.

The same could not be said about what was happening to Draco Malfoy.

During his fifth-year at Hogwarts Harry had become familiar with Malfoy's shimmering grey and maroon aura. It had always been easily identifiable --by being the only grey aura at Hogwarts, probably a family trait-- and though, Harry himself was loath to admit it, slightly brighter than average for an ordinary wizard.

I have a bad feeling about this, he silently announced to both Ginny and the Order.

Malfoy's aura was writhing and twisting about itself like a wild beast, but at the same time it was slowly losing its luminosity. If Harry were to describe Malfoy's aura as a living thing, which he sometimes thought auras were, then these were the death throes of an untamed animal.

~A very bad feeling~ agreed Ginny, watching with horrid fascination. From where she was standing by Harry's desk, off to one side of the stage, she had almost as clear a view of Malfoy as Harry did.

Without warning and without a sound, Malfoy's aura was smothered and extinguished. There was a hushed noise, a non-sound if that was possible, more a sensation than anything else. As Malfoy's aura was snuffed out, the fine hairs at the nape of Harry's neck and trailing down his spine stood on end as Malfoy was plunged into shadow.

Actually it's worse, declared Loki, his normally jovial voice sounding frighteningly grim.

Aye, agreed Beowulf's voice, **your bad feeling is justified.**

There were no longer even the faintest traces of a magical aura coming off Malfoy. Instead he seemed to be shrouded in shadows, as if he were standing in the middle of a poorly lit room. The only illumination that seemed to reach him reached his face, lighting his pointed features from below.

Harry was reminded of a Muggle child with a torch, telling ghost stories around the campfire.

This was impossible.

Malfoy was standing in the centre of the stage, right next to the lecturing podium, and in what was probably the most brightly lit spot in the auditorium.

Yet he was cloaked in a palpable darkness.

It was simply impossible, and Harry was greatly disconcerted by the sight. An icy hand seemed to have reached into his chest and taken hold of his heart. Something bad, something terrible was about to happen, he knew. And he doubted he would be able to stop it. In fact, he was beginning to have doubts that he would survive it either.

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Any suggestions? he asked, trying to keep his inner voice calm.

Just one.

What?

****Kill him before he kills you.****

Ginny watched as Malfoy, with a contemptuous smile, waved his hand in a lazy fashion. As he completed the motion, a bubble of vacillating shadow swirled into being around the auditorium's stage. It stopped just short of where Ginny was standing, by Harry's desk, and curved up into a dome that nearly reached the room's high ceiling.

At the same time Ginny heard loud booms as the large wooden doors leading in and out of the auditorium swung shut. As the reverberating booms faded Ginny risked a glance away from where Harry and Malfoy were facing off. She saw that, as she feared, the auditorium was completely closed off, the doorways shielded by the same churning and impassable shadow that encompassed the stage.

Damn, we're trapped.

It was some kind of magic. It had to be, but Ginny could not discern anything about it other than its shape and the impenetrable blackness that somehow seemed almost alive. Harry had once, a little over a year ago, asked her if she believed in true evil. At the time she had replied that Tom Riddle, Lord Voldemort, certainly fit the bill. Now, looking at what Malfoy had wrought between her and Harry, Ginny realized that some forms of evil were truer than others.

This was something dark, beyond anything Tom Riddle had ever or could ever hope to achieve. Whatever this was that Malfoy had tapped into, it was clearly ancient and incomprehensible. For a moment Ginny toyed with the idea that this was perhaps the antithesis of the Order of the Phoenix. The Order of the Snake or the Basilisk or the Dragon or the Chimaera or any of a dozen other 'dark' creatures.

Ginny considered this possibility for all of five or six seconds, until she recalled that evil was by nature selfish, and thus unlikely to willingly share its power. Whatever this was, it could never be controlled or subjugated to any one mages' will, not even a Dark Lord as powerful as Voldemort. It was an ancient evil, a power that had existed since beyond the rise of Voldemort and would continue on past his downfall.

Somehow, Ginny did not really know how or why, but she knew that this darkness was not the spawn of any earthly magic. It came from beyond; outside the times and spaces and dreams of magicians. It had been called forth many, many times before and had been banished back into the abyss each time, but only at a great and terrible cost, yet it was always returned to the world by fools that allowed their ambition and desire to overwhelm them.

She turned away from the mystically barricaded doorways to see Harry and Malfoy watching each other from across the stage floor. She drew her wand, preparing to make an attempt to break through the shield bubble that separated her from them.

****No! Don't do anything!****

Ginny almost jumped out of her skin with fright at the urgent tone Osiris used, his Egyptian accent coming through, thick and heavy. She paused in front of the undulating barrier, her wand gripped firmly in her hand.

What? Why? she asked, not letting her eyes stray from either Harry or Malfoy.

****Harry's trapped in there with him,**** explained another voice in a calmer tone, though Ginny could almost feel the tension lying beneath. ****He's going to need every erg of power the Order can give if he's going to get out of this alive.****

Heracles spoke up next, his voice unusually grim, ****We're dealing with something here that could conceivably kill every person in this castle if he can't stop it somehow.****

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Is Malfoy really that dangerous? Ginny asked in distress, unconsciously aware that whatever force it was that Malfoy had coupled with, it was plainly match for the Order of the Phoenix.

****More.****

~I already said I'm open to suggestions~ observed Harry, his thoughts edged with apprehension and anxiety that Ginny had never before associated with him.

****Harry, you're going to have to listen to us closely...****

Harry had regained his footing and was standing opposite Malfoy with unyielding determination, his arms folded across his chest. It was a small effort not to wince at the dull throb radiating from his injured chest, but Harry locked eyes with Malfoy and adopted the appearance of being perfectly willing to wait until doomsday for his antagonist to speak.

Finally, he did.

"So tell me, Potter," Malfoy began with his customary drawl, "how does it feel to be outclassed? To be overshadowed by something greater than you?"

"What the hell did you let Voldemort do to you, Malfoy?" asked Harry.

Malfoy smirked. "He made me a god."

"I know a few gods," countered Harry. "You're not one. You're just a schoolboy that's got in over his head in a situation he doesn't understand."

"Oh, I *understand* the situation perfectly," replied Malfoy, his eyes gleaming in the darkness that surrounded him. His smirk grew thin and dangerous as his voice grew steadily more strident as he proclaimed, "I *understand* that you are nothing compared to me. I *understand* that you cannot match my power. I *understand* that you cannot fight against me. I *understand* that you cannot escape my hold over you. I *understand* that you cannot even comprehend what I have become!"

****It's already starting,**** observed Sun Tzu gravely.

****Yes, we don't have much time.****

Are you sure? checked Harry, I mean, he's always had a swollen head. His ego's bigger than the school.

Alexander's voice conveyed the shaking of his metaphysical head, ****This isn't his ego talking, Harry.****

"What makes you think I'd be willing to fight you, Malfoy?" asked Harry, trying a different tack, watching behind Malfoy as the students trapped in the auditorium struggled to breach the shields blocking their escape. He was hoping to buy them time to get out before he tried to bring Malfoy to heel.

Malfoy threw back his head and laughed; a humourless and cruel sound. "Yes, I imagine you could Apparate to safety without too much difficulty. Only two anti-Apparition wards, the one around this room and the other around Hogwarts, wouldn't be much of an obstruction for the vaunted Order of the Phoenix."

Harry felt his mouth go dry. He, along with everyone else that knew about it, had tried his utmost to keep the Order a secret. There was not much written about the Order, only a few scarce and incomplete references - hardly enough to give anyone a true idea of its capabilities. Still, Harry preferred to err on the side of caution and not reveal the Order's existence to anyone he did not trust implicitly.

But somehow Malfoy knew.

"I know you, Potter," Malfoy continued, almost causing Harry to believe the Slytherin knew what he was thinking. His eyes, hooded in shadows, slid to one side, towards Ginny. "I know you well enough to realize that you would never flee from a fight that will put *innocent bystanders* in harm's way."

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"Don't you *dare* bring anyone else into this, Malfoy," Harry snapped, taking an angry step forward. He deftly slipped his robes off and tossed them to one side, freeing him to engage in the ranges of motion he would be needing when the fight began proper.

Malfoy snorted. "I wouldn't *dream* of having anybody interfere in our little duel, Potter. This is between the two of us alone. You and me, as it should have always been."

Harry drew his wand and held it up in a ready position as he assumed a formal duelling stance.

Waiting for Malfoy to do the same, he kept a close watch in case his opponent tried something underhanded. In fact he would be very surprised if Malfoy did not.

Instead, Malfoy ran a hand through his silver-blond locks and flicked his head back. He reached into his robes and drew out his wand, twirling it with his fingers like a baton. Harry could feel himself tensing in anticipation, but Malfoy did not rise to the occasion.

"D'you really think you can beat me, Potter?"

"You caught me by surprise earlier. It won't happen again."

"You're right about that," Malfoy sneered.

Harry was only barely able to duck out of the way as a stream of black fire erupted from the end of Malfoy's wand. He rolled to one side, coming up in a low crouch with his wand aimed right at Malfoy. "*Expelliarmus!*"

The curse rushed at Malfoy in a red blur, but that other boy simply slapped it away. He was actually contemptuous in his ease at doing so and it showed in his smirk. He waited patiently for Harry to clamber to his feet, shaking his head slightly as though disappointed.

"May God have mercy upon my enemies," he said, "because I won't."

Harry blinked and after a moment's thought asked, "Patton?"

Malfoy grinned wickedly. "I learn from my mistakes, Potter."

Harry tried not to wince as he remembered the lecture he had given Malfoy on Napoleon and the sound thrashing he had incurred upon him shortly afterwards. At the time it had seemed entirely appropriate and also highly amusing. After nearly a year Harry had to wonder if perhaps he not gone just a little bit over the top with his actions.

I think I made a mistake doing that, he thought with a twinge of regret. Harry had never paused to consider that his repeated humiliation of Malfoy might have only supplied his rival with greater motivation to follow his father's path.

****Don't let yourself be bothered by self-recrimination now, Harry,**** warned Merlin, his benign voice bringing a small amount of calm to Harry's racing thoughts.

****Now it the time for action,**** agreed Romulus, ****Concentrate on stopping him first, then you can worry about the consequences of your... our... actions.****

The duel suddenly began in earnest as Malfoy launched himself into the air, taking advantage of Harry's distraction. His leap carried him high above Harry, his head skimming only inches from the top of the magic bubble separating them from the others in the auditorium. With his wand clasped firmly in his left hand, at the apex of his short flight Malfoy tossed a blazing midnight blue and indigo fireball down at Harry with his right hand.

A quick back flip got Harry out of the way, but Malfoy continued his attack as he slowly drifted down to the stage floor. It was an eerie sight, more than a simple jump, but less than true levitation. It was almost as if Malfoy had become unbelievably light and gravity no longer held its normal sway over him.

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Harry used a combination of magic and what martial arts he knew to dodge as Malfoy continued to barrage him with fireballs from above. He seemed to skim across the floor, skipping left and right as the fireballs exploded where he had been standing only moments earlier, leaving smoking craters in the stone floor. Eventually, however, Harry ran out of places to dodge to, finding himself pressed up

against the black wall of the bubble imprisoning him with Malfoy.

Fortunately Malfoy had finally come to a feather light landing at almost the same time. His right hand was still ablaze with blue fire, but he was no longer able to press an advantage of height. Harry felt that it was time to turn from defence to offensive and no longer allow Malfoy to decide the way the duel was fought.

"*Serpensortia!*" he cried, levelling his wand at Malfoy.

A massive boa constrictor shot out of the tip of Harry's wand, looking very similar to the snake Harry had unintentionally freed from the Surrey Zoo many years earlier. He also remembered how Malfoy had tried this same spell against him in their second year, during Gilderoy Lockhart's abortive attempt at forming a duelling club.

He watched as the snake slithered towards Malfoy with frightening fluidity and speed, closing the twenty-yard gap in a matter of seconds. Unless Voldemort had somehow managed to transfer a portion of his Parseltongue abilities to him, there was no way Malfoy would be able to simply command the snake away from him.

Unfortunately Malfoy seemed blatantly unconcerned about the attacking boa, destroying Harry's hopes to take advantage of any distraction it might provide. With what could only be described as an evil smile Malfoy bent down and grabbed the boa as it reached him, grasping it firmly below its head with his right hand.

Malfoy's frigid grey eyes glittered through the shadows surrounding him as he looked across the scorched and pot marked stage at Harry. With theatrical exaggeration he shook his head and tsked in disapproval as his hand began to contract.

The boa writhed beneath him, wrapping its coils around his legs and slithering up to his waist in an attempt to pull free of his hold. Malfoy merely increased the pressure and soon Harry could hear loud cracks and pops as the snake abruptly fell limp, red blood oozing thickly between Malfoy's clenched fingers.

With callous ease Malfoy simultaneously tossed the dead creature aside with his right hand and aimed his wand at Harry with his left. "*Get over here!*"

Thin tendrils of black energy shot from Malfoy's wand, much as the boa had been cast from Harry's. The magical ropes stretched across the distance between the two combatants in the blink of an eye and grabbed hold of Harry before he could act. Malfoy pulled on his wand and Harry found himself being rapidly reeled in like a hooked fish.

Malfoy swung a sharp uppercut that snapped Harry's head back and caused his teeth to click together painfully. The magical ropes that had drawn him in had dissipated, leaving Harry free to stagger back and try to catch his breath. The metallic tang of blood filled his mouth as he dropped down low and tried to sweep Malfoy's legs out from under him.

His attempt failed as Malfoy hopped over his sweeping leg and landed nimbly on his feet, halfway back across the stage. The fingers of his right hand fashioned strange gestures as he traced an aberrant shape with the wand in his left hand. Harry felt a cold shiver run up and then back down his spine as the shadows surrounding Malfoy grew motley and began to seemingly merge with the background. Malfoy was rapidly fading away.

Oh heck, Harry swore as the implications immediately confronted him. This duel with Malfoy was sufficient complicated without him having to struggle against an invisible opponent.

****Get a Shield Charm up in case he tries to come at you from behind,**** advised Alexander.

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~Harry, where's Malfoy gone? Did he Apparate out of there?~ asked Ginny from outside the bubble, clearly not realizing that Malfoy was still present.

The bugger's turned himself invisible, Gin, Harry explained, sweeping his eyes from one side of the stage to the other and back, trying to find some hint as to Malfoy's location.

Without warning a solid blow, clearly a roundhouse kick, connected with Harry's stomach. The wind was knocked out of him and Harry staggered back, only to feel a rapid one-two set of jabs smashing into his jaw and sending him reeling to the floor. He twisted as he landed and hastily rolled clear, rising to his feet in a smooth motion. His wand had fallen from his grip during the assault and so he quickly summoned it to his hand, keeping a look out for his unseen attacker.

~Isn't there anyway we can detect him?~ asked Ginny, pressing up against the dome wall.

****Unfortunately no,**** replied Isis, ****This is a different kind of magic he's making use of. Our senses cannot perceive how achieves what he does.****

****Wait! Zere – do you see it?****

Harry narrowed his eyes to fine slits, focusing his gaze on the spot Joan was indicating. Nothing. It was a perfectly empty section of the stage. The slate grey stone tiles were exactly as Harry expected to find them and there was not even the faintest trace of distortion in the air. Nothing pointing towards the presence of an invisible object. There weren't even any shadows to...

I see it, Harry confirmed, letting his eyes slide past the slowly advancing spot so as not to arouse suspicion. Malfoy's veil of invisibility was superb, but flawed in that it was perhaps too perfect. It even hid the shadows that fell across it.

Using his peripheral vision to keep track of his approaching enemy, Harry continued to keep up the appearance of searching for a clue to Malfoy's location. He fingered his wand in expectation, allowing his and the Order's magic to flow and accumulate inside the focal point.

****Aren't you going to raise a shield?**** asked Romulus worriedly.

Not yet, replied Harry, deliberately turning his head slightly away from where Malfoy was hiding. He pursed his lips and slowly raised his wand, preparing to burst into action.

Malfoy's extraordinary method of invisibility was almost perfect in hiding him from view, but it did nothing to hide the sound of his leg rushing through the air at Harry. At the very last instant, cutting the timing closer than was safe, Harry spun back towards Malfoy and invoked a Shield Charm. There was a loud crack and the air right in front of Harry's face rippled under the unseen impact against the shield.

Harry's wand was up before the blow had even landed, "*Reducto!*"

It was a simple, but effective spell which caused Malfoy to reappear in a fragmented spray of shadow. The blast from the spell had been enough to disrupt Malfoy's concentration, bringing about an end to his invisibility. Harry, unfortunately, did not have any time to follow up on his attack. His retaliatory strike had clearly been unexpected, but Malfoy was fast to recover from his surprise.

He stepped in close to Harry and started pounding a hail of blows at Harry's head and shoulders. Harry tried to block the strikes, but Malfoy was swinging at him in a frenzied blur. Through his upraised arms Harry could make out an indescribable rage distorting his normally aristocratic features.

It reminded him frighteningly of how he sometimes felt during his Animagus transformations over the summer, when he and the Order had been coaching Ginny into becoming an Animagus.

As the rain of punches continued, hammering down on him, Harry contemplated the possibility of changing. He doubted that Malfoy, whatever he had become, would be able to survive being squashed by a hundred-foot tall Imperial Arch Griffin, especially in such a confined space. But that was also the root of the problem which was preventing Harry from transforming into his Animagus form.

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The Practical Fighting Techniques auditorium was a large room, one of the largest in Hogwarts, but Harry doubted he would be able to fit. As big as the room was, his Imperial Arch Griffin form would be dangerously close to filling it, and that was without the curving dome of black energy Malfoy had encompassed them in.

He could, presumably, break the shadowy barrier but that could conceivably endanger the several hundred students trapped within the auditorium.

Suddenly Malfoy backed away a step or two, his wand back in hand from wherever he had stowed it during his primal rampage. His eyes still glistened brightly in the dark, filled with a fury that bordered on insanity. His lips were parted in a feral snarl, baring his teeth in a death's head grin that made him almost unrecognisable.

"The-Boy-Who-Killed-The-Boy-Who-Lived" announced Malfoy in a low and satisfied sounding growl. With a casual ease that was in stark contrast to the wild fury of only moments earlier, Malfoy gestured with his wand, "I do like the sound of that."

In a whispered rush the bubble separating Harry and Malfoy from the rest of the students in the Practical Fighting Techniques auditorium vanished. One moment it was there, the next it was gone as though it had never existed. This was supposedly impossible. Any form of magic, be it a spell, hex, curse, enchantment, ward or whatever, always had a signature trace while being performed or used and even after it was gone.

Ginny, however, did not really care about the impossibility of the situation. Instead, the fiery young woman charged out onto the stage to join Harry. As she did, coming to stand beside him, she saw her brother, Hermione and several others also moving to surround Malfoy.

Harry, are you all right? She asked, reaching out to grab his shoulder.

Harry, his face bruised and bloodied, looked at her with an dubious expression and answered, "Never been better."

"Sorry, stupid question," she agreed, wincing in sympathy at a large gash where the skin had split over Harry cheek.

The group of students that had moved to enclose Malfoy were mostly Gryffindors, in their fifth, sixth and seventh-years – the ones who had participated in Practical Fighting Techniques the year before. A few of the more spirited third and fourth-years, namely Moira, had also decided to join the fray.

It was not only Gryffindor that had come down though as Ginny recognised several Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs that were spread amongst her housemates. None of the Slytherins came to help, nor did Ginny really expect any them to, being too busy trying to escape the sealed auditorium.

"Why is it you Gryffindors always think a futile gesture is a noble one?" asked Malfoy, looking around at encircling students with a malevolent sneer.

"If a gesture accomplishes anything, Mr Malfoy, then it is not futile," said Gregory Proteus. The new Defence Against the Dark Arts professor had come down to join the group, while his wife Hilary wound her way to the opposite side of the stage so that she could advance upon Malfoy from the other direction.

Malfoy's sneer deepened as he scoffed, "Rhetorical nonsense, Professor."

Having reached the side of the stage across from her husband, Hilary Proteus stepped forward and caught Malfoy's attention. She swept her golden mane back with one hand, her other holding her wand, and looked imploringly at him. "Be careful like a proper Slytherin and think about it, Draco. This power you've gained... it's corrupting you inside."

"And your point is? If you have absolute power, which I do..." Malfoy spread his arms wide and laughed. "Who cares?"

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The air around them began to stir, swirling about in a gentle breeze. Malfoy's grin became a predatory one as he turned to look at Harry again. "See you around, Potter. I look forward to the rematch," Malfoy bade them, sketching a short and mocking bow.

Darkness rushed up and over Malfoy from the ground, enveloping him in a coat of unfathomable black. Ginny could feel the mystical energies churning and bubbling with agitation all around her and with the Order's abilities she could make out the eddying currents that were congregating around where Malfoy was standing. It was odd, very odd, how he was disrupting the underlying magic on the stage when his earlier displays, when fighting against Harry, had not.

"Oh shit," swore Harry, watching the proceedings with wide eyes.

Don't just stand there, chided a voice, **get your shield charms up!**

Get everyone's shield charms up! You're going to need them!

"Shield Charms!" Harry shouted, raising his voice both to catch everyone's attention and also to make himself heard over the rising whistling of the air whipping about. "Everybody get your Shield Charms up! Do it like we practised last year and focus them *towards* Malfoy! Try and contain the blast!"

Blast? Ginny asked silently, forming a shield directly in front of her along with Ron and Hermione, who were standing alongside her.

"Try and overlap your shields!" Harry continued to yell over the rising howl of the wind, his eyes focused solely on Malfoy, who was almost lost amidst the tempest of black shadow that had formed at the centre of the stage.

~Hold tight~ he told her, reaching out to grab her fiercely by the hand.

It had been years since Ginny had last been at a beach and swum in the ocean. But the feeling of fighting against the waves immediately came back to her as she was buffeted by the energy. She struggled to hold the swell back, pushing and spreading her Shield Charm to and even beyond its limits in an attempt to contain the runaway flow of power.

"Bloody hell!" she heard Ron shout at her side, his voice almost drowned by the shrieking energy.

Loud cracks from above, like sharp and discordant thunder, reached her ears. Dimly she was aware that the auditorium's ceiling was collapsing down on them. But above all that Ginny was aware of the biting cold that permeated all around her, seeping and forcing its way into her body, her mind and her magic all at once.

Then, in a rumble of falling debris, everything went black.

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7. An Aftermath of Shadow

Harry's head hurt. Over the past few years he had become quite familiar with the feeling of having something like a troop of inebriated Scottish dancers thumping around within his skull. This was another one of those times.

His temples were pounding rhythmically with every beat of his heart. Even though he was standing perfectly still, Harry struggled against the rolling waves of dizziness and nausea that assaulted him. Muscles he hadn't known he had were aching dully and his mouth was drier than Percy's sense of humour.

After everything that had happened there was nothing strange about Harry feeling this way. What was strange, however, was the fact that Harry was obviously completely and utterly unconscious and yet he was still feeling the after-effects of his duel with Draco Malfoy. He knew that he had to be unconscious by the simple fact that he was currently standing in the centre of the Grand Hall of the Phoenix, its shimmering classical columns rising up on either side, disappearing into the haze that hid the ceiling far above.

"Gawd my head hurts."

Harry turned to look at Ginny, who standing beside him and swaying on her feet. He would have nodded his agreement to her pained complaint, but his own head immediately began threatening to fall off should he so much as try. Gritting his teeth Harry closed his eyes and tried to force the rising nausea back down.

Don't worry about it too much, came a familiar voice from behind them.

The two weary teens whipped around, or rather turned as slowly as they could to minimize the throbbing of their heads. Standing before them, looking particularly grave, was Merlin. His normally compassionate features were grimly set and his appearance was that of his later years rather than the youthful twenties he usually portrayed himself as being.

The nausea you're feeling should pass soon enough, he explained in a clipped voice, clearly impatient to spend time worrying about their physical condition. His stroked a hand along his jaw line, thumbing his white-speckled beard before continuing. **It's merely a lingering effect of the battle you've just fought. Whatever physical injuries you've suffered have in all likelihood already been dealt with by the Hogwarts staff.**

"What happened?" asked Harry, noticing that none of the other members of the Order had appeared within the confines of the Grand Hall of the Phoenix.

What do you remember?

Both teenagers exchanged a look, then Ginny turned back to Merlin and shrugged. "The last thing I can recall is the ceiling starting to collapse."

Merlin nodded in agreement and elaborated, **The Well was using some sort of Translocation magic to leave Hogwarts' boundaries. It disrupted the ether until there was a catastrophic backwash of magical energy, hence the explosion. You were able to contain most of it, but enough managed to force its way through your combined Shield Charms.**

"What about the cold we felt?" asked Harry, rubbing his arms as he recalled the wintry chill that had descended over him in those final moments before he lost consciousness.

We'll explain that shortly, Merlin stated, waving them in the direction of a large and ornately

decorated oak door set in to one side of the Grand Hall. *The other members of the Order are waiting inside for us.*

Harry started to follow Merlin as the elderly-looking wizard led the way. Surprisingly enough he found that Merlin had been right and that the dizziness that had first assaulted him was rapidly fading, although the queasy tremors in his stomach were still making themselves known.

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As they crossed the luminescent white marble floor, Harry glanced at Ginny and saw that she too looked better, although at the same time apprehensive. He reached out and grasped her hand in his, smiling reassuringly when she looked at him. She returned his smile with a tremulous one and together they stepped through the wide door Merlin was holding open for them.

Now this is interesting, he observed, his eyebrows climbing almost to his hairline.

~Certainly does look familiar~ agreed Ginny as she swept her gaze over the room.

It was a perfectly circular room and --Harry could not stop a small smile at the thought-- it looked just like the room he had always imagined being used by the Knights of the Round Table. The walls were made of large, roughly hewn stone blocks that dwarfed those used in the construction of Hogwarts. Dozens of brightly coloured and elaborately decorated pennants hung from the walls, interspersed with impressive coats of arms. And everything, the walls, the ceiling, the banners and even the massive oak table in the centre, was suffused with a soft glow of mystical force.

Except for the iridescence, confirmed Merlin, smiling properly for the first time since they had arrived, *this is an exact replica of the room Arthur and those crazy knights of his used to play around in.*

Harry and Ginny crossed to where two empty seats were waiting for them. Merlin strode over to the other side of the table, opposite them, and sat in the only other empty place. It was quite a gathering assembled at the Round Table: all of the currently active members of the Order. They were all there, all the voices that Harry and Ginny were familiar with, sitting and waiting with grim expressions for them to arrive.

"So," began Harry, resting his elbows on the tabletop and clasping his hands together, "could somebody please explain to Ginny and me just what in the billions of bilious blue blistering barnacles is going on?"

The Well of Shadows has returned.

Harry glanced at Ginny out the corner of his eye and saw that her reaction mirrored his. As far as answers went, this one was almost as nebulous and unclear as one given by Dumbledore. Ginny, obviously less than pleased with this lack of detail, settled in her seat and crossed her arms. "O-kay," she said sarcastically, "that clears up *everything*."

"All right," tried Harry, leaning forward to rest his chin on his clasped hands, "on a scale of one to ten, one being a minor headache, ten being the end of the world and all life on earth, how bad is this?"

On a scale of one to ten... Merlin trailed off ominously.

Twenty, declared Romulus.

His brother, Remus, nodded and then unfortunately added, *Maybe more.*

Harry's hands dropped to the table as his head turned so that he could lock eyes with Ginny. Her normally warm coffee-coloured eyes were wide and filled with unease. She swallowed and then licked her lips before reaching to take his hand in hers once again. Harry squeezed her hand and turned to face the waiting members of the Order.

"Start talking."

She was lying on a bed in the Hospital Wing.

Ginny did not even need to open her eyes to know this. All she needed to do in order to learn where she lay was listen to Harry's low and resigned thoughts on the subject.

~Why can't I ever wake up after a fight and not be in the Hospital Wing?~

What about at the beginning of last summer? asked Ginny, slowly opening her eyes and confirming that she was indeed ensconced in the school infirmary. *After that bastard shot you, you woke up in Ron's bed.*

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Turning her head to the right, based on her feeling the magic trilling like phoenix song in that direction, Ginny saw that Harry was lying on the bed next to hers. His hair was an absolute mess, even worse than was normal, and his face was marred by the startling sight of two very black and blue encircled eyes.

"You look like a raccoon," she said, breaking into a grin.

"So do you," retorted Harry, arching an eyebrow at her.

Any further byplay they had was cut short by the appearance of Madam Pomfrey, who bustled into the space between their beds. The Hogwarts nurse leaned over to look at Ginny first, her brow puckered in a frown.

"Are you all right, Miss Weasley?" she asked, her voice hinting at a lack of rest.

"I can't remember the last time I was hit that hard," stated Ginny. After a moment's thought, she was forced to admit, "In fact, come to think of it... I can't remember *ever* being hit that hard."

Madam Pomfrey nodded. "Quite understandable, you literally had a tonne of bricks fall on you."

She turned away from Ginny and gave Harry a quick going over, ascertaining that he wasn't on the cusp of dying any time soon. Satisfied, she turned to the small nightstand resting between the two beds and picked up a pair of flasks.

"Here, drink this," she directed Ginny, handing her one of the flasks, filled an electric blue liquid that

was bubbling softly in it. "It should take care of the bruises for you."

Ginny accepted the flask, peering distrustfully at its contents before taking a cautious sip. Her lips curled down as the unbelievably bitter taste assaulted her. Ginny liked her coffee without cream or sugar, thank you very much, so she was used to bitter drinks, but this was undrinkable.

"Drink up, Ms Weasley," Pomfrey told her, already turning to Harry's bed and handing him the other flask of healing potion. "The whole lot, that's it."

Trying not to grimace, Ginny took a deep breath and downed the vile liquid in a single quaff, her throat convulsing as the thick liquid wormed its way to her stomach. The aftertaste was, if possible, even worse than when she had tried only a sip.

Ugh, this stuff is revolting.

~No disagreement here~ replied Harry, eyeing his now empty flask with a loathing expression. At least it seemed to be working as Ginny noticed the bruises around his eyes and across the bridge of his nose beginning to fade, *~It's almost as bad as that Skele-Gro poison she once gave me.~*

How come the Order didn't heal us on its own?

"Ah, here comes Miss Granger," announced Pomfrey, before taking the flasks again and setting them back on the nightstand. She slipped out from between the two beds and started towards the doors leading out of the infirmary. "I'm going to let Professor Dumbledore know that the two of you are finally awake."

Finally? thought Ginny as Madam Pomfrey hurried out.

~Guess we were out for longer than we thought~ replied Harry, turning to look in the direction

Pomfrey had indicated, from where Hermione was approaching.

"Harry, Ginny, thank Merlin you're finally awake!"

I'm never going to get away from that saying, am I? sighed Merlin's voice.

Ginny looked at her friend and blinked in surprise. Again someone had declared them finally awake, which implied that they had been out cold for some time. But looking at Hermione, Ginny simply could not believe it. The bushy haired girl's robes, while not exactly covered in dirt and grime, were wrinkled and rumpled as though she had been sleeping in them for the last year or two. Her eyes were ringed with dark blue circles and stark lines of exhaustion surrounded her mouth and hollow cheeks.

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But most prominent of all was the sling encasing her right arm.

"Hermione," she breathed in shock, not to mention a little horror, "are you okay?"

Hermione's mouth, curved in a small and relieved smile, set into a grim line. As she came to stand at the foot of their two beds, she shook her head, causing her hair to whip about her face, revealing it to be tangled and matted together from lack of grooming. Her voice, when she spoke, had dropped several registers and matched her sombre appearance. "I'm fine. Don't worry about it."

Ginny glanced across at Harry, noting that he too seemed a bit sceptical about their friend's condition. For the moment though they said nothing about it.

"What day is it?" asked Harry, sitting up, "What d'you mean '*finally awake*'? How long have we been in here?"

"Three days," replied Hermione, looking down at her feet.

Ginny almost exploded in indignation, "THREE DAYS?!?! What the frigging crap is your arm still doing in a sling then?! Pomfrey should've bloody well fixed it up almost immediately after you were hurt!"

"Don't blame Madam Pomfrey," Hermione said in a quiet voice, effectively cutting off Ginny's planned indignant and scathing outburst condemning Madam Pomfrey's medical skills. Ginny was startled to see Hermione's eyes beginning to glisten with tears and her bottom lip was trembling with emotion, "There's nothing more she, or anyone else can do."

What? Harry, what's she talking about?

~I don't know~ replied Harry, a look of concern on his face, *~but I'm going to find out.~*

"Hermione," he said, leaning as far forward as he could and reaching out to grab hold of Hermione's left hand, which was hanging limply at her side. He tugged on her arm and drew the teary-eyed girl into the space between Ginny and his beds. Keeping a gentle, but resolved hold on her, he asked,

"What happened?"

Much to Ginny's surprise, Hermione burst into tears, which were quickly streaming down her cheeks like a torrent of sparkling diamonds. Harry, being the kind and compassionate man she knew him to be, took Hermione in both his arms and pulled her into an embrace.

What happened down there?

~Nothing good, I'm afraid.~

Hermione cried softly in Harry's arms for several minutes, pressing her face against his shoulder as her body was wracked by deep sobs. Finally she began to calm down, her tears spent, as Harry soothingly rubbed his hands up and down her back. Taking a deep breath she pulled away from him and sat on the edge of his bed, allowing her composure to return.

"Sorry," she whispered as she wiped at her eyes.

"S'okay, Hermione," assured Harry quietly, one of his hands still at her waist.

"Hermione, what's going on?" asked Ginny. "What happened after the explosion? What's wrong with your arm?"

Hermione bit her bottom lip so hard Ginny was almost afraid she would draw blood. Her shining cinnamon eyes took on a haunted aspect as she dropped her chin. "The ceiling collapsed on us," she began. "Almost everybody was buried under the rubble, even those that weren't on the stage with you two and Malfoy. It took Dumbledore and the staff nearly three hours to dig their way into the room

and almost the rest of the night freeing us."

Ginny felt a sharp pang, a leaden feeling, form in the pit of her stomach and saw that Harry was closing his eyes. His expression was a sad one, almost anguished, as though he were bracing himself for the worst. Taking a deep and shuddering breath he asked, "How bad was it?"

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"Very bad," answered Hermione, looking up at him and sliding her left arm around him so that they were supporting each other. She licked her lips and began to give the details that Ginny feared to hear.

"Three of us were killed outright, during the cave in. James Mortimer, one of the fourth-year Ravenclaws. Alice Fletcher and Elizabeth Halpern, both from Hufflepuff."

"No one in Gryffindor?" asked Ginny, more than a little guilty of the relief she felt in hearing that none of her other friends or housemates had been killed.

Hermione squeezed her eyes tightly shut and pressed closer to Harry. After nearly a minute of tense silence she told them, "Lucy Ferrier."

Ginny could almost feel her blood freeze as it flowed through her veins. She opened her mouth and tried to speak, but nothing came out. Tears of her own began to fill her eyes and she desperately tried to blink them away, but all too soon she could feel them gliding down her cheeks and taste the bitter salt on her lips.

Through the watery haze of her tears Ginny could see that Harry had reached up a hand and covered his eyes, his lips drawn in a tight and distressed line. With a tired sigh he lowered his hand and looked into her eyes, his own bright with grief.

"Her injuries were too severe," elaborated Hermione in a flat and monotone voice. "She died while they were moving her up to the Hospital Wing. Two Slytherins, Graham Pritchard and Rosmarie Cartwright, were also injured too badly to save. Graham passed away around noon and Rosmarie sometime during the night."

~Malfoy will pay for this~ Ginny heard Harry think, feeling how his emotions were beginning to seethe and churn with anger. His expression had changed from one of grief-stricken angst to that of dogged resolution. *~I swear I will rip his black heart out of his chest with my bare hands for this.~* Ginny had seen Harry at his best and his worst. She could rightfully say, having literally been inside his mind, that she knew him better than anyone else. She knew that he had great reserves of emotion within him, more often than not repressed behind his normally calm and collected exterior. She had even got into a fistfight with his animalistic side, so to speak, an experience she would not soon forget. In spite of all this, Ginny had never seen him looking half as dangerous as he did now. She had seen him consumed with an almost blinding fury, after the attack on Hogsmeade the previous Christmas. She knew how deep his feelings ran and had thought that display of raw fury had been the most out of control and most dangerous she would ever see him.

She was partially right.

It was the most out of control she had ever seen him.

It was not, however, the most dangerous.

She could feel it, almost a part of her, but still separate. Not a blistering rage, but a cold, focused determination. About as dangerous as you could get. And, truth be told, even though she did not want to admit it, it managed to frighten Ginny a little bit.

"And your arm?" she asked, trying to divert both their and her own attention away from the loss they were all feeling.

"A large chunk of the ceiling fell on top of me," answered Hermione, slipping her left arm from Harry's waist and stroking her immobile right arm. "My shoulder was crushed. If it had been a Muggle doctor, instead of a medi-witch, they would have had to amputate it, it was so bad."

Hermione looked up from caressing her injured arm and gave Ginny a wan smile. "The Ministry brought in dozens of medi-witches and wizards from St. Mungo's to help with all the wounded. They were able to fix the bones and the muscles and ligaments and tendons, but..."

Harry picked up where she had trailed off, obviously understanding what she was implying while Ginny did not. He tenderly lifted his arm from around her waist and gripped her left shoulder, "The nerves?"

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"Yes," Hermione nodded and a few more tears silently spilled from her eyes, "the damage is too extensive even for magic to properly heal. Doctor Watson, one of the neurological specialists at St. Mungo's, says I'll only have about thirty to fifty percent mobility once they take the sling off, they're not sure yet. I can still use the hand, but I'm rather... clumsy now."

"Oh, Hermione," breathed Ginny, feeling a second wave of tears brimming as she pushed out of her bed and crossed the short span separating them. She sat down on the other side of Hermione from Harry and pulled her friend into a tight hug. Both of them sat there, holding each other in their arms and crying softly, while Harry despairingly tried to comfort both of them.

Several minutes passed as Ginny did her best to try and comfort Hermione, rocking back and forth and occasionally imitating her mother, Molly, and crooning. Harry eventually, looking far more collected than either of the girls, detached them from each other. Ginny saw him glancing around, and knew he was using his abilities to scan the infirmary's magic, obviously looking for someone. He twisted to face Hermione and asked, "Where's Ron? Why isn't he with you? After all he is your boyfriend."

"I - I was... visiting him... when I heard Madam Pomfrey saying you were awake," admitted Hermione, not responding as Ginny had thought she would. She had expected that mention of her brother's name would at least bring a smile to Hermione's disheartened face. Then her words registered on Ginny's thoughts and she felt her blood run cold yet again this day.

Oh no, she thought desperately, dreading the idea, *please no*.

Harry, obviously picking up Hermione's meaning, looked at her. Shakily he asked, "What happened to Ron? Is he..."

"He's alive," Hermione allayed their fears. She sighed, an exhausted and despondent-sounding sigh, and sank her head into the palm of her free hand. "Unfortunately he was badly injured. The same piece of debris that fell on me... it hit him as well."

"How..." Ginny's throat constricted and she had to swallow before asking, "How bad is it?"

Hermione looked up and stared into Ginny's eyes. "Bad. The brunt of the blow was to his head and neck... he's in a coma. Madam Pomfrey doesn't know when he'll wake up."

Hearing this was terrible enough for Ginny. Her heart had skipped a beat and it felt as if the floor had suddenly dropped out from under her. Ginny had, over the years, tried to imagine losing one or more of her brothers. It was an image that she simply found herself unable to form; they were such a part of her life, her very being, that she could not conceive not having them around her. Hermione's next words, filled with anguish, managed to crack the last of Ginny's self-control and bring a fresh wave of tears.

"If he ever does."

It had taken Harry quite a few minutes to calm Ginny down, practically having to force her back into her bed. She had protested quite loudly through her tears, determined to go and see Ron, who, Hermione informed them, was residing in a small private room near Madam Pomfrey's office at the other end of the infirmary.

Fortunately Hermione was able to help him, regaining her normal calm. Between the two of them they were able to bring an end Ginny's masterful caricature of her mother having an anxiety attack. She also set to rest Harry's greatest concern; that Ron had suffered brain damage from his injury. There were thankfully no obvious indications of any swelling or bruising that might lead to that terrifying possibility.

The three of them had sat there for several minutes, talking quietly when Dumbledore finally arrived to greet them. Harry was not excessively surprised to see Professors McGonagall and Snape, as well as Arthur and Molly Weasley accompanying the headmaster. He was, however, surprised by the presence of Bill, Charlie, Percy and the twins; Fred and George.

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They all came, he thought, for a moment feeling a pang of regret that he did not have his own parents and family to do the same. Though the Weasleys had all but adopted him, especially over the last summer, Harry still yearned for his lost family and whatever future they might have had together.

Molly was beside herself and immediately ran across the infirmary to pull Ginny into one of her bonecrushing embraces. Within moments both women were sniffing quietly and Harry was slightly worried that he would be having a repeat of Ginny and Hermione's earlier display. He did not begrudge either of them the need to find comfort in each other, but he doubted that he would be able to endure another such bout of emotion without breaking into tears himself.

"Are you all right, Harry?" asked Arthur, standing just behind his wife and turning to Harry while she and his daughter were otherwise engaged. The head of the Weasley family, though Molly might contest the title, seemed to be almost as drawn and worn from exhaustion as Hermione, his face looking many years old than when Harry had last seen him less than a week ago.

"No," replied Harry honestly. He looked to where Hermione was quietly greeting the twins, both displaying the gentle and compassionate side that they usually kept hidden from view, and then turned back at Arthur. "After hearing about the aftermath... I'm anything but all right."

Molly had drawn away from Ginny, pulling a large and frilly handkerchief from her robes to blow her nose. She turned to Harry and, unsurprisingly, swept him into a hug that rival the one she had given Ginny. She was clinging to him in a way that reminded Harry of how she had thanked him for rescuing Ginny from the Chamber of Secrets so many years before.

"Don't be too hard on yourself, Harry," she whispered in his ear before releasing him, "nobody blames you for what happened. Hermione, and the other students, told us what you did."

"I should have done *more*," insisted Harry, unwilling to meet her gaze. Self-recrimination was something that came easily to Harry, especially after Cedric's death during the third task.

Dumbledore stepped forward, resting his hands on Molly and Arthur's shoulders and guiding them back to give Harry and Ginny some breathing room. "It is my experience, Harry, that a hero's greatest critic is often himself."

Ignoring Snape's soft, yet derisive snort, Harry lifted his head and looked intently into Dumbledore's blue eyes. He shook his head and persisted, "I'm not a hero. A hero would've got everyone out safely. A hero wouldn't have let anyone die."

"Bullshit!"

"Watch your language, William Weasley," berated Molly, turning on her eldest son with a fierce glare that Bill had no option but to quail under. He might well have been the coolest of the Weasley brothers, what with his long hair, earring and stylish clothing, but Bill was still wisely deferential to his mother.

~They're right you know~ came a thought from Ginny, causing Harry to glance over at her. She was currently in the arms of Fred and George, whose playful and teasing spirit seemed somewhat dimmer than usual. It was as if they had shed their joking nature like old robes they no longer had a use for.

Ginny pressed on by telling him, *~If anybody is to blame, Harry, it's Malfoy. Him and everyone that helped Tom do this to him.~*

You're right, I suppose, Harry agreed, sighing, *but I still feel guilty about it, y'know? That I could have done more than I did.*

"We have many things to discuss," announced Dumbledore, looking around at the assembled witches and wizards surrounding the two hospital beds. Molly ceased her scolding of Bill, who was looking very contrite, to centre her attention on the headmaster. "Our new Defence Against the Dark Arts professors, Gregory and Hilary Proteus, are currently making a sweep of Hogwarts grounds, so we need not fear being interrupted or overheard."

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"Are you sure about them, Albus?" Harry found himself asking, voicing his concerns. "I mean, aside from Professor Lupin, we haven't had much luck with our Defence Against the Dark Arts professors. The two of them seem a bit... out of place."

"I have known both Gregory and Hilary since they were children," replied Dumbledore. "I have no question of where their loyalties lie. Both of them are beyond reproach in any fashion and may well be our greatest asset during this school year."

The venerable wizard's eyes sparkled with a mysterious mischief. "Besides which, they were recommended for the post by someone I have the utmost faith in. Suffice to say I would trust Gregory and Hilary with my life," concluded Dumbledore, pulling up a chair and seating himself. "Now perhaps you would be so kind as explain to the rest of us here just it was that transpired in the Practical Fighting Techniques auditorium last week."

D'you want to explain this? asked Harry silently, *or should I?*

~You're the one with all the lecturing experience,~ decided Ginny, settling back into her bed and its copious number of pillows.

"The Order of the Phoenix has existed for untold ages," Harry began to explain, sitting up straighter in his bed. He glanced at Ginny and took hold of her hand. "We, the custodians of its power, have encountered the Well of Shadows in many of those ages. Each time the Well has been created the consequences have been most dire."

It was Snape, standing off to one side, who asked, "What, pray tell, is this - this Well of Shadows you're talking about?"

Harry looked at Snape and replied, "Draco Malfoy is now the Well of Shadows."

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8. Explanations, Introductions and Advice

Harry did not want to go to class right now. It was not that he had didn't enjoy Defence Against the Dark Arts; he actually considered it his favourite class. Aside from his second year when they had been stuck with that bumbling idiot Lockhart for a teacher. No, it had nothing to do with the class or the, admittedly, somewhat eccentric new professors teaching it.

He was just too fatigued to garner any enthusiasm for it.

The previous afternoon, in which he and Ginny had had to explain recent events, seemed to last forever before they were finished. As he trudged wearily along the corridor to the waiting Defence Against the Dark Arts classroom, for his first lesson therein, Harry began to recall how the conversation had gone.

"What the blazes d'you mean Draco Malfoy is this Well of Shadows?" Snape had asked in his usual belligerent tones, alternating his fierce scowl between Harry and Ginny.

Harry had sighed, resigned to the fact that he would never manage to have a conversation with the Potions Master that was not confrontational. It was a simple fact that he would have to endure. He had tried to elaborate as best he could. "Sometime over the summer, I'm afraid we don't know precisely when, Voldemort was able to change Malfoy into the Well of Shadows."

Charlie, who had been sitting on a chair just behind his father, had asked, "What is this Well you keep mentioning? Is it like the Order of the Phoenix?"

"No, the Well is simply a force," Harry had explained. "It has no... no motive, no intelligence guiding it like the Order does. Instead it is just raw power - a nearly endless, relentless supply of it. The Well is more ancient than any of us can dream, and controls forces that we are often unaware even exist. There is no consciousness behind it, besides whatever Malfoy can supply it with now that he is the Well."

"You keep saying that," Professor McGonagall had observed. "What d'you mean that young Malfoy *is* this Well?"

Harry had pursed his lips and mulled over how to explain it as clearly as possible before he had given an answer. "The Well of Shadows is just like any ordinary well," he had said, "you use it to obtain something from somewhere. In the case of a normal well, you lower a bucket down the shaft to get water at the bottom. The Well of Shadows is similar, only you're not drawing on anything as harmless as water."

Hermione, ever the clever witch, had caught on first. "Dark magic. Shadows."

"More or less," Harry had agreed. "The Well, in this case Draco Malfoy, draws its power by absorbing or disrupting certain magical essences surrounding it. Unlike the Order of the Phoenix, the Well's power does not regenerate over time. Like any other well it will eventually run dry if it does not get anything to replace what is used. That is why everyone on the stage, during the fight, felt the sensation of cold when they got near to Malfoy. He was draining them. Their magic, their life force, the very essence of their being - their souls."

"Once their magic is extracted," Ginny had continued for him, "the Well transmutes the magic, refining it into a form it can use. Shadow. A completely different kind of magic."

"Great Maker," Molly Weasley had breathed in horror. All of those assembled around the two hospital beds had been visibly shaken and disturbed by what they had learned.

Bill, with his knowledge of curses, had asked, "But if it gets its power by draining the magic out of people, why would You-Know-Who use it on someone else? Why risk having Malfoy drain not only us, but him as well?"

Harry had then delivered the news that no doubt would cause many sleepless nights in the future. "The problem, the danger, is that becoming the Well of Shadows puts a terrible strain on whoever is unlucky enough to be chosen."

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"A strain? How so?" Dumbledore had asked.

"The energy, the power poured into the Well is vaster than any one person can safely contain. Just creating the Well requires the sacrifice of a hundred wizards and their magic. Can you imagine having the life energy of a hundred people transferred into you? It's not like the Order, where the power is stored *around* you, here the power is stored *inside* you, making you the Well."

Ginny had then summed it up. "After about a year, depending on how heavily the Well uses its powers, it will eventually kill him. As it is, the stress will cause an increasingly unstable state of mind. Tom knows the consequences of being the Well of Shadows. He's using Malfoy as a... I think the Muggles call it a Fire-and-Forget weapon."

Harry had nodded his agreement. "Exactly, though not quite as simple as it may seem. Voldemort will use the Well to wear down our defences, decimate our forces while sparing his own. He won't have told Malfoy what's going to happen, but it won't help him in the end."

"What d'you mean by that?" Fred and George had chorused.

"Malfoy's going insane," Ginny had explained, "even now, after less than a couple of months, he's starting to develop a god complex. Sooner or later he's going to decide that Tom will make a better servant than master."

Snape had looked alarmed. "You mean he will turn against the Dark Lord?"

Harry had chuckled mirthlessly. "If we're lucky he might totally annihilate him and all his Death Eaters and spare us the trouble of doing it ourselves."

"Is there any way to stop him?" asked Dumbledore.

He had exchanged a pensive look with Ginny. "There is a way to... dispel the Well, but it will not be easy. We'll need to make full use of Hogwarts' resources to pull it off."

Ginny had then added, "Even with outside help it's going to take us months to design and implement it. After that it's basically a waiting game."

"Wait a moment," Percy had said, frowning thoughtfully as he fingered his bottom lip. He had looked at them through his horn-rimmed glasses and asked, "How did You-Know-Who change Malfoy into this Well of Shadows?"

"There are a number of ways he could have discovered the ceremony," Harry had admitted. "The process is recorded in some of the older, darker and more obscure tomes of magic: The Necronomicon, the book of Skelos..."

Percy had shook his head and interrupted, "No! I mean *how* did he do it? What was required to make the Well? You said something about a sacrifice?"

Ginny nodded. "Yes. One hundred wizarding folk and their magic would be needed give the Well sufficient impetus to become self-sustaining."

"Then why didn't we know about it?" Percy had asked incredulously. "I mean if You-Know-Who had to murder a hundred people to do it... *where are the bodies?* You can't just lose track of a *hundred people!* Not all at once!"

As he finished his journey through the corridors, arriving at the Defence Against the Dark Arts classroom, Harry pondered Percy's excellent question. The possible answers and their implications were almost as disturbing as the revelation that the Well of Shadows had returned.

The remainder of the day had been spent in the Hospital Wing. Madam Pomfrey had loudly and persistently commanded that he and Ginny stay overnight for observation. After Dumbledore and the other professors had departed, Harry and Ginny had gone to visit Ron, accompanied by Hermione and the rest of the Weasleys.

Suffice it to say yesterday had not been particularly restful.

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Waving a muted hello to the ever-enthusiastic Colin Creevey as the mousy fifth-year passed by, Harry shifted his bag and stepped inside the classroom. Hopefully the new professors would be able to provide a distraction from Harry's increasingly depressing and worried thoughts.

Hopefully.

Harry settled into his seat next to Hermione, who had been granted permission from Madam Pomfrey to finally discard the sling around her right arm. Despite this improvement Hermione was still looking more haggard than normal. She had retired to Gryffindor Tower late the previous evening to bathe and catch up on her sleep. Unsurprisingly Harry and Ginny had woken up in the morning to find that she had slipped out sometime during the night and was at Ron's bedside.

Having just come off his free period, after having dropped Divination at the start of his fifth-year he had one every other day, while Hermione had been attending Arithmancy Harry asked, "You doing all right?"

"Reasonably well," she responded. Hermione's right arm, which she held close to her side as though pressing against a stitch, shifted languidly as she made a nondescript gesture with her hand. "At least in Arithmancy I don't have to use my wand like we had to in Charms."

The Gryffindor sixth-years had had Charms with Professor Flitwick that morning before lunch.

Hermione, due to the injury to her arm, had experienced mounting frustration as she struggled to accomplish even the easier charmwork they had been revising. She no longer had the control of motion needed to control her wand's movements.

Harry set his books, some blank parchment and quills on the desk and gave her a commiserating squeeze on the shoulder. "It will get better, Hermione. You just need time to get used to it."

"Maybe," she answered, obviously struggling with her books and other things with only her left hand to handle them properly.

~Harry?~

He settled back in his seat, aware of the other Gryffindors chatting quietly around him, and responded to Ginny's silent call. *Yes? What is it?* he asked, *Where are you?*

~Muggle Studies~ came a quick answer, ~Harry... *what's the difference between a CD and an LP?*~

Harry was watching as the two Professors Proteus entered the classroom, talking quietly as they made their way to the desk at the front. *CDs are smaller*, he told her. He smiled softly and then added, *I know this might constitute cheating...*

Ginny's thoughts were a blend of mock indignation and humour. ~*I promise not to ask for your help during any tests.*~

"All right settle down, you lot," announced Gregory Proteus. He was standing behind the teacher's desk, leaning over it with both hands on its top. He smiled amiably and said, "It's not like this class is a Muggle CD that we can pause or rewind if you're not paying attention."

Harry, quite naturally, almost fell out of his seat.

For a moment, several of them in fact, Harry wondered if perhaps his new professor could read minds. The idea would normally have seemed ridiculous. However, since Harry had been doing just that with Ginny he had to wonder. The slightly bemused, yet also mysterious smile Gregory wore did not help dissuade him from this disturbing thought.

The Gryffindors quickly ceased their conversations and sat up straight. Harry glanced at Hermione to see if she had noticed anything, but his friend was already paying studious attention to the two professors at the front of the class.

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"For the sake of clarity," began Hilary Proteus, pulling out the chair behind the desk and reclining lazily in it, "since there are two Professor Proteuses, we'd like for you to call us either Hilary or Gregory in order to avoid confusion."

"Yes, Ms Granger?" asked Gregory as Hermione's left hand shot up.

"Professor Proteus-" she began and lowered her arm.

"Gregory," interrupted Gregory, correcting her and smiling mischievously as he did.

Hermione's face showed her unease. Harry had to smile though when she quickly collected herself and resumed by saying, "Professor Gregory."

Nobody was able to completely stifle their snickers of amusement, especially the two professors, who seemed delighted by Hermione's impromptu designation. Hilary, clapping her hands together in light applause, smiled up at Gregory as he leaned back against the blackboard.

"Yes, Hermione, what's your question?" he asked.

"Isn't it... inappropriate to use your given names?"

Gregory bobbed his head around and finally shrugged his shoulders before answering. "To some degree I suppose it is, but we won't tell the other members of staff if you don't." He ran a hand through his unruly mahogany hair and asked, "Any other questions before we begin today's lesson?"

None of the students seemed to think of anything particularly important and so Gregory pushed off from the blackboard he had been leaning against. He quickly crossed to the desk that Hilary was still lounging behind and lifted something up from behind it and settled it on top of the desk, in full view of the students.

"Excellent," he said as he moved the large, covered cage. He placed a hand on the cover and in a very serious voice said, "I must ask you not to scream."

Harry, feeling an extreme sensation of déjà vu, shared an apprehensive look with Hermione. They, as well as the rest of the Gryffindors, could clearly remember the last time one of their Defence teachers had placed a covered cage before them.

"Yes," Gregory said dramatically, whipping the cover off the cage and exposing to the class the creatures trapped within its bars.

The reactions from the Gryffindors could be broken down into many different categories. However, there was one aspect about them that was the same. Horror. Dumbstruck, disbelieving horror at what was revealed to them.

Parvati, whose long dark hair had suffered the ignominy of being chopped into an uneven looking crew cut by Madam Pomfrey several days earlier, gave a loud eep of alarm and immediately ducked underneath the desk. Lavender, sitting next to Parvati, uttered a similar sounding yelp and jumped out of her seat and backed up against the wall behind her.

Dean, obviously deciding to save what he could, began stuffing all of his books and rolls of parchment back into his bag. Seamus sat rooted to the spot, looking very pale and staring with disbelieving wide brown eyes and a shocked open mouth. Neville, who was seated between the two boys, immediately clamped his hands over his ears and began whimpering in a decidedly un-Gryffindor-like manner.

Next to Harry, Hermione fumbled about her robes with her left hand before grabbing her wand and aiming it unsteadily at the cage. Her eyes were as wide as saucers and she swallowed convulsively several times as her wand trembled in her hand.

Harry simply sank his head against the desktop with a soft thud.

"Yes," repeated Gregory with a dramatic flourish, "freshly caught *Cornish pixies*."

"Have you lost your mind?"

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Harry looked up when Hilary asked this, silently hoping that perhaps only the one half of the two new professors was insane. He could all too clearly remember the pandemonium the Cornish pixies had caused four years before when Gilderoy Lockhart had presented them to the class.

Gregory, grinning in a manner not unlike Fred and George, said, "According to my business partners, yes."

"My brothers are hardly a pair of men I'd trust to make any judgement with regards to your, mine or anyone else's sanity," stated Hilary, rolling her eyes and shifting in her seat.

Gregory shrugged helplessly and turned back to the class, where the students were beginning to recover from the surprise of seeing the pixies. Parvati was peering cautiously over the top of the desk she was hiding under. Lavender had pried herself away from the wall and resumed her seat while Dean had apparently decided to wait and see what happened before making a break for it. Neville, however, was still covering his ears.

"No need to get so worked up about it," mentioned Gregory, sitting on the corner of the desk next to the pixie cage. He wagged a finger at his students, smiling with what seemed to be his customary good humour. "I know all about your little 'adventure' with these particular creatures during your second year. However, I should point out I am hardly as inept as that bumbling charlatan Lockhart was."

He rose up from the desk and indicated both Hilary and the pixie cage. "I'm here, with my lovely wife along for the ride, to teach you how to deal with these and other creatures. Just dumping you in the deep end of the pool without any prior experience is not the way I teach. Most of the time."

"As I recall," observed Hilary, "the first time you ever taught anything, your students lived in mortal terror of being called down to assist you in your demonstrations."

"Yes, well," he retorted, "we all have our little problems."

The remainder of the lesson proceeded relatively well after that, once the students had recovered from the shock of seeing the pixies again. Harry had to admit that, after the initial worry, it had actually been an informative and enjoyable experience. Well, perhaps not all that informative since Harry had the collective knowledge and wisdom of the Order on the Phoenix as his beck and call. Despite this, he had still enjoyed the class just as much as he did when Professor Lupin had taken it, perhaps even more so.

The two professors had worked well together and played off against each other in perfect harmony. After giving a brief, yet comprehensive, description of pixies and their habits, Professor Gregory as they had quickly come to call him, had proceeded to demonstrate neatly and efficiently how to control the little terrors.

Professor Gregory's manner of teaching, assisted by his wife --they apparently alternated their lesson plans-- was a style Harry found very comfortable. It was not unlike his own actually, when he taught Practical Fighting Techniques, although much more refined and somewhat less likely to send his students to the infirmary afterwards.

How I wish we'd had these two back in second-year, instead of that idiot Lockhart.

~Anyone would've been better than Lockhart~ agreed Ginny, who, Harry knew, was already on her way to Gryffindor Tower after finishing her class on Muggle Studies. Her thoughts were tinged with a cheeky amusement. *~Even Neville could fly circles around him - and you know how Neville is on a broom.~*

The two professors were just dismissing the class, but only after giving them a short assignment to work on over the weekend. Harry, having packed his bag, tentatively offered to help Hermione with her own things, but received a very firm negative shake of her head.

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Harry was more than a little worried, as he had been very aware throughout the class of how Hermione was struggling with her right arm. It was not only difficult for her to use her wand, but she was also struggling to write to her notes properly. Her hand, indeed her whole arm, tended to shake unsteadily when she tried to use it.

Nobody had said anything though, not even when it was clearly evident that Hermione was on the brink of tears by the lesson's end.

He was almost out of the classroom, trailing after Hermione who was leading the way, when he was stopped by Professor Gregory's voice. "One moment, Harry," he had called, walking unhurriedly over to the doorway. "If it's not a bad time I'd like to speak with you for a few minutes in my office."

Harry paused and glanced at Hermione. He was worried about her and had been intending to escort her back to Gryffindor Tower before they went down for dinner. He was about to explain this when Hermione shook her head and waved him off with her good arm. "Don't fret, Harry," she said with a hint of annoyance, "I'm just going to start writing that letter you wanted me to send."

"Okay," he acquiesced reluctantly. After a pause he told her, "You can use Hedwig to deliver it. Just wait for me so that we can go to the Owlery together before dinner."

Hermione nodded in agreement and hurried down the corridor, holding her right arm close to her side as she went. Harry watched her go with a bit of trepidation, but was relieved to see that Neville, as well as Lavender and Parvati had hung back in their own trek to the tower and were quickly moving to keep Hermione company.

From behind him Gregory clapped a hand on his shoulder and said, "She'll be fine. Now why don't we get to the office? I believe you know the way."

"I'll let you two play by yourselves," said Hilary from inside the classroom. She was still sitting at the teacher's desk and was sprawled idly in the chair. Tucking a stray strand of her golden hair behind one ear, she told them, "I'm going to the library to find material for next week's lessons. I'll see you in the Great Hall."

"So what's your opinion of my darling wife?" Gregory asked after they had walked together a fair distance down the corridor leading to the professors' office.

Harry's first thought was along the lines of, *I think the two of you are amongst the craziest people I've ever met. Including Fred and George.*

Harry's second and third thoughts were identical to this.

Harry's fourth thought was to be diplomatic and so he said, "She's... interesting."

"You have no idea," grinned Gregory as they strode along. The professor's sea-green eyes were twinkling with merriment not unlike Dumbledore's often did as he said, "Y'see, Harry, they say men are from Mars and women are from Venus. My wife, on the other hand, is from some distant planet that astronomers have yet to discover."

It was lucky for Harry that they had reached the professors' office and had stopped just outside the door, otherwise he might have tripped over his own feet. Gregory laughed and clapped him on the back as he swung the door open and gestured for Harry to enter.

Harry had never been inside the office during the time, in his first year, when Professor Quirrel had held the post. He had, however, ventured within during the tenures of the other professors that had taught him over the years. Professor Lockhart, in Harry's second-year, had covered over the walls of the room with dozen of pictures and posters of himself, all smiling inanely. Remus Lupin, during Harry's third and fifth years, had filled the room with all manner of strange and interesting specimens he was planning to teach about. Barty Crouch Jr, who had been masquerading as Mad-Eye Moody in Harry's fourth year, had played the part of an eccentric and paranoid old Auror and had displayed his dark magic detectors wherever he could fit them.

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By contrast to all these the office was now completely empty and bare of any sort of decoration or paraphernalia. Instead there were only two barren desks, with accompanying chairs. A few books were scattered about, although Harry recognised them as being copies of the set textbooks which the students themselves used. The walls and the many shelves along them sat empty of anything to indicate the nature or personalities of the two professors using the room.

"I know it's a little bare at the moment," Gregory said, following Harry into the office. "It's just that our departure from home was something of a rush, so we didn't have the time to bring anything with us. We quite literally arrived in Hogsmeade with nothing but the robes we were wearing."

The only thing Harry saw that had not been supplied by Hogwarts itself, was sitting on a small table in one corner of the room. It looked suspiciously like a Muggle electric kettle, but without an electrical cord to plug it in. Resting next to the kettle was a silver tea set, surrounded by a wide assortment of small boxes and tins. Other than these few innocuous items the room was completely Spartan.

"Coffee, Harry?" asked Gregory, striding over to the table and kettle, while motioning for Harry to pull up a chair in front of the one desk.

"No thanks," Harry declined, sitting in the proffered chair, "I don't like coffee all that much, really."

Gregory set the kettle boiling, having evidently enchanted it earlier to run without electricity. Harry wondered if this meant that Mr Weasley would have to arrest him, since it was technically illegal to charm Muggle objects.

"I quite agree," concurred Gregory, setting up a pair of teacups next to the kettle and reaching into one of the tins. "Too bitter for my taste, but my wife loves the stuff."

"So does Ginny," commented Harry, reading the label of the tin Gregory was searching through and seeing that it was a brand of mint-flavoured tea.

Gregory placed the tea bags in each cup. "I know," he said as he lifted the kettle and poured their drinks. Setting the kettle down, he picked up the teacups and placed them on a small silver tray with some milk and sugar. He crossed to the desk Harry was sitting by and set the tray down in front of Harry before dropping into the chair on the other side of the desk.

"Help yourself to some milk and sugar once the tea's drawn," he offered, waving at the respective containers. "I hope you don't have any objections to drinking tea? I think we have some hot chocolate if you'd prefer that..."

"No," confirmed Harry, "in fact, mint tea is my favourite."

The sociable professor grinned. "Mine too. Hilary's rather partial to the taste as well, although she never drinks it."

Harry reached for the milk jug and poured a dollop into his cup. "What did you want to speak with me about, sir?"

Gregory was busy spooning sugar into his cup and answered without looking up. His voice, until now fairly light-hearted and easygoing, was eminently serious. "Miss Granger."

"What about her?"

"My wife and I are not blind, Harry," said Gregory, offering him the sugar. "In fact I think just about everyone is more than able to see the difficulty she is having adjusting to her injury."

"It hasn't even been a week," Harry replied cautiously. "You can't expect her to become perfectly adept or comfortable with it in such a short time."

Gregory was stirring the milk into his tea and shook his head. "We don't. What we're worrying about is how she is adjusting on an emotional level. Hermione is a very independent and also very stubborn young lady. She might not be willing to admit that she will be needing help with tasks she was once

perfectly capable of handling on her own."

Harry grimaced. "We'll be there for her. All of us."

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"I don't doubt it," agreed Gregory, clinking his teaspoon lightly against the rim of his cup. "However you must find a way to help her when she needs it."

"Ginny and I are already working on it," admitted Harry, sipping at his tea. He looked with a touch of approval at his cup, pleasantly surprised by the quality of the drink. He mentioned as much to Gregory before continuing, "Unfortunately it will take years before we can help her regain full use of her arm."

"Oh?" Gregory cocked his head in question. "What's the delay?"

Harry frowned and set his tea aside, "The potion we're considering is very... intricate. And many of the ingredients are either very rare or need to be obtained at specific times. The earliest we could manage to brew it won't be for another seven or eight years."

A sad smile of understanding graced Gregory's lips as he nodded. "Until then, Harry, you and your friends will have to help her in other ways. Maybe not as grandiose as fully restoring her arm, but just as important to her. Something, a goal, in her life for her to strive towards. A distraction from her troubles if you will."

"I'm always open to suggestions, sir."

"It's her right arm that was injured, Harry," Gregory leaned forward, his eyes narrowed into a penetrating gaze that seemed to challenge Harry. He smiled knowingly, "If her right hand can no longer be used as she needs, teach her to use her *left* hand."

Harry shook his head. "But that would take months, maybe even years..."

"Not necessarily," replied Gregory, lifting his cup to his mouth. "You're ambidextrous, aren't you, Harry? But you were born right-handed. Until your fifteenth birthday the only thing you used your left hand for was as a place to strap your wristwatch."

Harry was immeasurably relieved that the professor didn't say anything further about the possible uses Harry might have found for his left hand. He certainly did not want to be embarrassed in front of a man he had only just met. His relief, however, only lasted until Gregory smirked and added, "Among other things."

Their conversation had gone reasonably well, which pleased Gregory as he watched Harry depart his office and silently make his way to Gryffindor Tower. He smiled as he recalled the younger man's acute embarrassment earlier.

Some things can't be changed, he thought to himself as Harry disappeared around a corner.

"He looks just like I did at that age," Gregory mentioned when he felt a presence behind him.

His wife, Hilary, came to stand next to him. She slipped an arm around his waist and leaned slightly against him. Her hazel eyes were sparkling as she said, "You certainly were cute - what happened?" Gregory rolled his eyes before ducking his head down to lightly brush his lips against hers. After they separated from the kiss, he asked, "Did you manage to plant the book in the Restricted Section?"

"Yes," Hilary confirmed with a sharp nod. "It went off without a hitch. Madam Pince didn't notice a thing. Are you sure they won't discover it's a fake?"

"They won't," he stated confidently. He was still looking at the corridor Harry had walked down, his expression taking on a slightly pensive note.

Hilary noticed his changing mood and asked, "He's certainly going to have an interesting night tonight, isn't he?"

His laughter rang softly through the air as he nodded in agreement, "All three of them are, though I think Harry's morning is going to be far more interesting than his night will be."

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9. Sleeping Arrangements ~

Harry slowly drifted to consciousness, reluctantly letting the veil of sleep fall away from him as he returned to the waking world. His lack of enthusiasm was primarily rooted in the fact that he had been having a very pleasant dream involving himself, Ginny and a large carton of peanut-butter and strawberry flavoured ice-cream.

He had just been getting to the interesting bits, both of the dream and the ice-cream covered Ginny, when he became aware of a weight resting on his left arm.

Though his eyes remained shut he smiled at the realization that he was lying with Ginny curled up in his arms. His thoughts and memories were still fuzzy, but the warmth of her body pressed against him negated any need to think clearly, he felt. Instead of worrying about the all too real likelihood of being discovered sharing a bed with Ginny at Hogwarts, Harry simply lay in the bed and luxuriated in the sensations that were beginning to seep into his mind.

His right arm was draped over Ginny's waist and had somehow during the night slipped inside her negligee allowing his hand to rest on her bare stomach. He could feel her back and the curves of her rear and thighs pressing along the length of his body. His left arm was curled underneath her, supporting the weight of her head which had brought about his slow awakening.

Memories of his highly entertaining, not to mention erotic, dream began to come back to him. Though no ice-cream was present, peanut-butter and strawberry flavoured or not, a lascivious smile came to him. Lying there with Ginny cuddled up against him, Harry decided to gently rouse her in a manner he knew, from prior experience over the summer, she would appreciate.

Keeping his eyes closed, Harry slowly began to move his right hand across the silky plains of Ginny's stomach. Breathing in deeply as he cautiously shifted closer to her, Harry could smell the faint scent of apples from her hair. In that abstract manner of drowsy half-wakefulness, he briefly noticed that she

must have changed her shampoo.

As he gently tickled the fingers of his hand around her navel, earning soft giggles of enjoyment from Ginny that bolstered his amorous desires, Harry leaned his head in and adoringly nuzzled at her neck. Ginny wiggled about, murmuring quietly, while his hand paused as he decided in which direction to proceed.

He blew softly on Ginny's neck, both to stimulate her and remove the stray wisp of curly hair that was tickling his nose. She shivered slightly at his breath and Harry began to ever so slowly let his hand wind its way down. The tips of his fingers were only just brushing against her sleek skin, leisurely dipping fractionally lower with each sway of his wrist.

Hmm... curly, Harry's somnolent mind managed to think. His hand's movements began to slow as his thoughts followed this observation, *No. Not curly. Bushy.*

Harry froze so still --every single muscle he possessed becoming fixed as stone-- that he could almost have passed for having been petrified by a Basilisk.

Oh dear.

His sudden and total shock was further compounded when the bed shifted behind him, indicating the presence of a third person. A slender, clearly feminine arm snaked its way around his waist and a pair of long and silken legs became entwined with his from behind.

The arm curled around his waist was bent at the elbow, so her hand was resting on his chest. Her breasts were pressing against his back as she snuggled up to him. Harry could feel her head resting behind his on the pillow and he could detect the familiar fragrance of cherry. There was a warm, tickling sensation on the back of his neck every time she breathed.

I'm going to die of a heart attack, he thought desperately. *Either that or Ginny's going to kill me.*

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Far too apprehensive to even consider opening his eyes to see who it was he was embracing, Harry lay completely motionless between the two women. Licking his lips nervously, especially when the hand resting on his chest sneaked down to slip up and under his pyjama top, Harry decided to brave capturing Ginny's sleepy attention.

Gin? he asked, holding his breath as he awaited her reply.

~Hmnnnn~ came a sleepy response.

Are you awake?

Ginny replied, *~Mm-hmm.~*

The hand at his chest began circling in slow, languid strokes. Wanting to confirm his suspicions as to just who it was teasing him so, Harry enquired, *Are you behind me?*

~Uh-huh~ Behind him, Harry could feel Ginny nodding her head fractionally.

Swallowing nervously he asked the question that was preying very heavily on his mind at the moment. He was slightly, more than slightly to be honest, nervous as to how Ginny would react but he managed to ask, *Then who's the half-naked girl in front of me?*

"WHAT?!"

.oOo.

- The Previous Evening -

Harry was looking forward to a good night's sleep. No offence to Madam Pomfrey and her work, but the beds in the Hospital Wing left much to be desired. Primarily, Harry felt, they needed the addition of certain nubile, young redhead he had become rather fond of. Yes, the beds in the infirmary would be much more hospitable with a Ginny resting in each of them.

It had been an exquisite torture the previous night, having to sleep with Ginny so near to him but unable to cross the short gap separating their beds.

Suffice it to say the previous night had not provided much in the way of good sleep. Of course, Harry and Ginny had both been worn out so they had managed to get several hours of shuteye in, even though it had hardly been restful for them. Sleeping in separate beds, even only a yard or two apart, was not something either of them was used to anymore.

"Good 't have you back with us, Harry," Seamus said as they readied themselves for bed.

"Yeah," agreed Dean, from behind his drawn curtains. "It was too empty in here with only Seamus, Neville and me."

Harry smiled as he pulled on his pyjama top. "Thanks, mates. After four nights in the Hospital Wing, it's great to be back."

Tonight though, tonight, Harry knew he would be getting a fitful sleep. After all, he could not have anything less with Ginny beside him. He had spoken to Dumbledore after dinner, allegedly to discuss the repairs and renovations for the ruined Practical Fighting Techniques auditorium. Towards the end of the conversation Harry had tentatively broached, once again, the subject of him and Ginny possibly sharing a bed.

Surprisingly the headmaster had readily agreed to it, although he had cautioned both of them to be as discreet as possible. That had of course gone without saying, although his grandfatherly entreaty to also be careful about the possible consequences had managed to bring a bright blush to both their faces.

"G'night, Harry," called Neville, already sounding sleepy. Dean and Seamus followed close on the heels of his words and after Harry returned their goodnights, the Gryffindor boys settled down for the night.

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Harry lay back on his bed and silently counting off the minutes as he waited. Using his wand for some light he checked the wizard wristwatch Ginny had given him the previous Christmas and saw that it

had been nearly a quarter of an hour. Silently stretching out with his senses Harry confirmed that his three roommates were sleeping quietly in their beds.

Ginny? It's clear.

~I'm climbing the stairs now~ came a quick response. As the thought came to him, Harry felt the warm glow Ginny radiated. He had surreptitiously placed a Silencing Charm on the dormitory door earlier, as well as a Muffling Charm on the floor. Added to the multitude of Silencing Charms already in place around his bed, not even the faintest of sounds reached his ears as Ginny crept into the room.

Silent as the night the drapes to his bed parted and a shadowy figure slipped inside. The light from his wand illuminated Ginny's fiery red hair and the dark blue satin nightdress she was wearing. Harry reached out a hand and gently pulled her down to him, half on top of him on the bedside.

~This would be a lot easier if we had your invisibility cloak~ she mentioned, lovingly planting a kiss on the tip of his nose.

Sirius borrowed it, remember? he replied, returning her kiss with one to the cheek. He smiled at her in the dimness. *At least we don't have to worry about anybody overhearing us.*

Ginny nodded and proceeded to kiss him fervently on the lips, using her hands to grasp his head close against her. Harry's arms were wrapped around her waist and he slid one hand up to press between her shoulders as his other slipped down to cup her rear as he held her tight. She gasped into his mouth and pulled back, breaking their kiss, looking at him with her eyes bright and full of desire.

~It's still early~ she noted suggestively, releasing one hand from behind his head and trailing it down his neck and along his collarbone.

Why, Miss Weasley, Harry thought, leaning in to trace a path of kisses along her neck. He gently nuzzled against her, relishing in the contact. *I thought we told Dumbledore that we'd be discreet.*

Ginny grinned impishly and playfully nipped at his ear. *~We have plenty of Silencing Charms up and around your bed...~*

Ordinarily it would have been extremely difficult for somebody to sneak up on the couple, as their connection with the Order of the Phoenix would allow them to perceive the approaching magic early on. At the moment, however, Harry and Ginny were otherwise too preoccupied to be paying any attention to the magic surrounding them. Thus they almost jumped out of their skins when the curtains surrounding Harry's bed were unexpectedly pulled aside.

"Harry?"

The voice came in a hushed, not to mention surprised, whisper. Harry and Ginny, who had jumped apart as if struck by a bolt of lightning from a clear blue sky, stared up at the embarrassment flushed face of Hermione.

~I don't care if she's my brother's girlfriend~ he heard Ginny thinking, *~I'm still going to kill her for interrupting us.~*

Wait, Gin, wait, he cautioned, *look at her face.*

Hermione was standing there, staring at the young lovers with a look of acute astonishment and awkwardness firmly in place. However, upon looking more closely, it became apparent that there was something more bothering her. Hermione's eyes were rimmed with red, showing that she had been crying recently and her bottom lip was trembling almost imperceptibly.

"Ginny?" she asked, her left hand clutching the curtains, "what are you doing here? I didn't know

Dumbledore had agreed to let the two of you sleep together yet."

"It's... provisional at the moment, Hermione," explained Ginny, picking up on the other girl's distress and sitting up straighter. She patted on the bed between her and Harry, motioning for Hermione to sit down.

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A small sob escaped from Hermione's quivering lips as she dropped heavily onto the bed. Harry shifted until he was almost right up against her and slipped his arm around her shoulders. He shared a worried look with Ginny behind Hermione's back and then turned to ask, "What's the matter, Hermione? Is something wrong?"

Wordlessly Hermione handed him a crumpled piece of paper she had been holding in her right hand, her movements slow and deliberate, but still unsteady. As Harry took the paper from her, noting that it was Muggle paper instead of proper parchment, she began to weep softly. Tears streamed down her face and Ginny squeezed close and slipped her one arm around Hermione's waist, taking hold of her left arm with the other. His apprehension building, Harry uncrumpled the sheet of paper and began to read.

Dearest Hermione,

This has been a very hard letter for us to write, but we feel, as your parents, that we must do this. It would be in your best interests if you were to leave Hogwarts. --Harry literally felt his heart skip a beat when he read this--We know how much you have enjoyed your time there, but we're talking about your safety now, Hermione.

You have always told us, and everything we've heard and read seemed to back it up, that Hogwarts School is considered the safest place in the magical world. We know that Professor Dumbledore is widely renowned as the greatest wizard of modern times, as that Professor McGonagall told us, and we know that your friend Harry is supposedly just as great, if not more so. But surely now, after this disaster, you must see that this is all wrong and you are indeed at risk there.

Hermione, you've been hurt, and even the wizarding world cannot help you, from what the letter we received from the school nurse said. We simply do not feel that you are safe there. We want you home. We know that you are a witch, and we're very proud of what you have accomplished over the years. We also understand that you won't want to leave your other friend, the one who was so badly injured

with you, and no doubt wish to remain at his side. But we want to have you here with us, where we know that you will be safe and sound.

Do not think, even for a moment, that we are doing this to punish you in any way, Hermione. We love you more than anything in the whole world. This was not an easy decision for us to make and we hope that someday you will see that we are correct in our actions.

We have sent a formal letter to the school's headmaster, informing him of our intention to withdraw you from the school upon the start of the Christmas holidays. We hope that this will give you enough time to tidy up your affairs there and say goodbye to all your friends and schoolmates before you leave.

Perhaps, with some luck, if the situation in the wizarding world improves before long, we will consider reapplying you in a couple of years, once everything has died down.

All our love,

Mum & Dad

Harry had been reading the letter out loud in his mind, so he did not bother handing it to Ginny once he was done. Instead he reached out and gently set the piece of paper down on his nightstand before turning to Hermione. The tears were falling in a steady stream now and her breath was coming in sharp gasping sobs that seemed to be almost torn from her very soul.

"It's all right, Hermione," he said, taking her in his arms for the most comforting embrace he could muster. He held her to him and rubbed his hands in soothing circles on her back, whispering soft nothings as they rocked back and forth. "We'll work something out, don't doubt that. We'll not be letting you go without a fight."

He was startled out of his soft comfortings when Hermione reached up with her good left arm, while sliding her right around his waist as best she could, and pulled his head down to hers. Her lips sought out his mouth and pushed firmly against it in a desperate and almost frantic kiss. Harry sucked in a sharp breath of surprise, his eyes growing wide at Hermione's inexplicable action.

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Out of everything he had been through over the years, this was one of the most terrifying and heart wrenching experiences Harry had ever had. Hermione was so unlike her usual collected and steadfast self. The raw, uncensored need that he could feel as she frantically kissed him was heartbreaking. She seemed so desperate... so... scared...

~Harry?~

Despite the feeling of Hermione's lips against his, the salty taste of her tears, Harry still heard the hard edge that accompanied Ginny's thought. He struggled against the bruising force of Hermione's kiss, sliding his arms up to her shoulders with the intention of gently pushing her back and freeing himself.

Yes?

Ginny's inner voice was frighteningly calm as she asked, *~What are you doing?~*

Um... kissing Hermione?

~So I see. Might I ask why?~

Harry could clearly hear the rising cold fire that was bubbling beneath Ginny's words. He could even feel the surge of magic within her aura, a build-up of power in preparation for what he knew would be a horrible mistake if handled incorrectly.

I think it would do more harm than good if I pushed her away right now, he tried to explain, lifting one hand away from Hermione and towards Ginny, behind her, in supplication.

Ginny did not have the time to respond because suddenly Hermione was in motion. Her eyes snapped open and she broke the kiss with a horrified gasp. She jerked away from Harry, as if physically stuck, and lifted her good hand to her mouth in a fist, biting down so hard on her white knuckles that she visibly drew blood. Had it not been for the already almost unearthly quiet that surrounded Harry's bed, he might not have heard her sobbed whimper, "Oh, Ron, what have I done..."

Quick as a flash Hermione pushed off the edge of the bed and jumped to her feet. Harry could see that she was about to flee, the guilt that had suddenly overwhelmed her was easily visible. He barely even needed to consider his next actions. He knew that if she left it would be disastrous for all involved.

Too much would be left unsaid between them for Harry to just let her leave without trying to talk her through this.

As she turned, beginning to take flight to the refuge of her own dormitory and bed, Harry's arm snapped out like a coiled snake striking. His hand grasped Hermione firmly around her upper right arm, holding her in a grip that kept her from running.

His biggest problem, beyond the possible jealousy from Ginny, was that he didn't know where to begin. The way Hermione had seeming lost all control hinted at a bigger problem than being removed from Hogwarts. His friend was hurting in the worst possible way and he honestly doubted that he would be able to help her.

At least, not alone.

Please, Gin, he begged desperately, turning his eyes toward her, *I need your help for this.*

Ginny looked at him for a long, pregnant moment. Her eyes were bright, even in the dimness. Harry felt a great swell of relief as her gaze slid across from him to where Hermione was standing, head downcast, and gave a solemn nod. She looked back at him and smiled sadly. *~She is our friend~* she told him, *~We'd be no better than Tom if we don't try to help her when she needs us the most. I'll help.~*

Harry smiled and let out the breath he had unknowingly been holding. He tugged gently on Hermione's arm, turning her back to the bed, and reached out with his other hand to pull her back to her seat between him and Ginny. Hermione dropped onto the bed with a sob and almost collapsed

against him, resting her head on his chest.

"I'm sorry, Harry," she whispered, clenching her eyes closed against the still falling tears. "Oh God, I'm so sorry..."

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Harry carefully put his arms around her and pulled her to him, instinctively aware that he had to assuage her fears and prevent her insecurities from dominating her

"It's all right, Hermione," he told her as he softly stroked her hair. He could see Ginny sitting right behind her, looking just as anguished as he felt. They did not speak, nor did they share each other's thoughts. Instead they considered what to do next, merely by looking into the other's eyes.

"Hermione," he said softly, "look at me."

Half-heartedly she lifted her head, her red and tear stained eyes unable to meet his own. He released his supporting hold on her and reached up to hold her face with both hands, lifting her chin up so that she was looking properly at him. She moaned softly, a sound of miserable torment that tugged painfully at his heart, and closed her eyes. She dropped her head against his chest again and whispered in a desperate voice, "Don't leave... Please, I don't want to leave... I don't want to be alone right now..."

Harry said nothing. Instead he allowed Ginny to crawl up behind them both and snake her arms between them, hugging Hermione and silently spilling tears of her own. Together the trio sat on the edge of Harry's bed, holding each other in mournful embraces.

"We won't leave, Hermione," he said after a while, when the girls' tears began to subside and dry away. "You can stay here with us tonight... any night, for as long as you need. We'll always be here for you. Always."

Hermione whispered an almost inaudible plea, "I only want to feel safe..."

"I know," he nodded, slowly running a hand up and down her back. He pulled her tightly up against him and tenderly turned her face to his with one hand, dabbing away her tears with his thumb as she clung to him for support.

It was not the good night's sleep he had been hoping for.

.oOo.

There had been many more tears during the night and a few brotherly kisses as well, although fortunately none that matched the initial fervour of the first. Eventually, in the early hours of the morning, Hermione had lost herself to the land of dreams, leaving a troubled Harry and Ginny. The two of them had lain quietly, discussing Hermione's situation, but after a time sleep had claimed them as well.

Consider yourself lucky I remember what happened last night, Harry, Ginny told him as she lean over his rigid torso to confirm that it was indeed Hermione in his arms. Harry's head turned a fraction and he looked at her with wide green eyes.

"I consider myself lucky that I'm starting to remember it myself," he whispered, nodding toward Hermione. "I think I damn near gave myself heart failure when I woke up."

Ginny chuckled as she recalled how Harry had suddenly tensed beside her as she slowly awakened. Leaning down, she kissed him softly on his cheek. "I'll admit my own heart stopped beating for a second when you asked me who was in bed with us."

He reached up with his right arm --his left was still trapped under Hermione's head-- and ran his fingers through the soft waves of her unrestrained hair. His lips curved in a sad and hesitant smile before he asked, "You're not angry, I hope? About this?"

"Oh, I'm angry all right," Ginny told him, her brows drawing into a scowl not unlike the one her mother was famous for. She paused just long enough for Harry to start looking worried before she finished. "The next time we see Malfoy, you're going to have to get in line when it comes to kicking his misbegotten bastard's arse from here to the South Pole."

"If anyone deserves it, he certainly does," agreed Harry, relaxing.

"Who deserves what?"

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Both teenagers turned to the source of the sleepily, barely awake voice. This naturally resulted in Harry burying his face in Hermione's tangled hair and sputtering incoherently for several seconds, earning light laughter from Ginny. Hermione twisted around, resting more fully on her back, and stared at the two of them.

"What's the matter? Y'okay?" she asked, rubbing the sleep from her eyes with her left hand.

"We're fine," Harry told her, "Ginny was simply demonstrating her similarity to Fred and George."

"Ey!"

The two witches and the wizard trapped between them lay in the bed for several minutes, simply basking in the light-hearted atmosphere and friendly camaraderie that surrounded them. The muted laughter at Ginny's expense soon died down and they quietly relaxed in each other's arms.

"Harry? Ginny?" Hermione eventually asked, pushing herself up on her good elbow and looking at them with glistening, soulful eyes. Ginny could only see how small and frightened her friend seemed.

"Thanks. You know... for letting me..."

"Don't," Harry interrupted, lifting a finger to her lips. He shook his head fractionally and then pushed himself up so that he was sitting next to her. He gently leaned close and placed a brotherly kiss on Hermione's forehead. "Don't say anything. There's no need for words between us, Hermione. Not when it comes to matters like this. There never should be and there never will be."

Hermione looked over Harry's shoulder at Ginny, a question in her soft brown eyes. Ginny nodded her agreement to his words and reached out to lightly grasp the other girl's hand. Giving her a comforting

squeeze, as Hermione pulled Harry into a tearful hug, Ginny rolled to the far side of the bed and sat up to stretch.

It was a luxurious feeling, stretching her arms out high above her head as she arched her back. Ginny loved the way she could almost feel the tension flowing out of her, leaving her muscles quivering in release. This morning, however, the knots in her neck and shoulders seemed to be stubbornly refusing to depart. Ginny smiled as this would be the perfect excuse to get Harry to lay her down and give one of those delicious backrubs she loved.

If there was one thing she had discovered about Harry over the summer, sharing a bed with him, it was that he was remarkably good with his hands. Ginny felt a faint rush of blood tinting her cheeks as she recalled some of the experiences of the summer when she had learnt just how talented Harry's hands could be.

She almost vaporised poor Neville as the rotund boy unexpectedly pulled back the curtains drawn around Harry's bed. He did not appear to be paying all that much attention as he spoke, "Harry, I was wondering if I... i... i-yi-yiiii-yi-yi."

Apparently he had realized that Harry was firmly in the embrace of a decidedly feminine figure, which he must have quickly identified by the way his eyes grew larger than a house-elf. Hermione pulled back from Harry and looked at the dumbstruck boy, asking in a playful tone, "Really, Neville, is that any way to say good morning?"

"H-H-HU-HUH-HUH-HUUuuu..."

"I think I preferred 'i-yi-yiiii-yi-yi'," remarked Hermione dryly.

Finally Neville managed to sputter out, "H-H-HERMIONE!!"

Hermione was grinning impishly by this point, clearly an expression she had learned from either Ron or the twins. "Ah... now we're getting somewhere."

"B-b-but Harry!" protested Neville, pointing between Harry and Hermione. His expression was almost indescribable. He had obviously noted not only the close proximity between Harry and Hermione, but also the dishevelled appearance of both their pyjamas. His mouth worked soundlessly for several seconds before he tried to ask, "Wh- wha- what about- what about-"

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Apparently Neville was so flummoxed by the sight of Harry and Hermione that he had completely failed to notice Ginny sitting on the other side of the bed. She decided that since the poor boy seemed on the verge of a panic attack, that it would be best to reveal her presence. In doing so she leaned across, wrapping both her arms around Harry and asked, "Is there something wrong, Neville?"

Neville remained motionless where he was standing, staring at Ginny with wide eyes and a gaping mouth. After a few seconds, he did the only reasonable thing he could think of.

He fainted.

"Congratulations, Gin," said Harry, peering over Hermione's shoulder and over the edge of the bed toward the floor, "you've killed Neville."

Gregory and Hilary were standing outside the portrait hole, being closely watched by a suspicious-looking Fat Lady. It wasn't the crack of dawn anymore, but it was not that late in the morning either.

Thus the painting was understandably distrustful of the two professors' presence outside the Gryffindor common room at such an early hour. Since neither of them had bothered to introduce themselves to her she was unaware that they were actually members of the staff.

"What I wouldn't give for a photograph of this moment," declared Gregory wistfully.

"You have definitely been spending far too much time with your brothers-in-law than is good for you,"

Hilary told him, with a jaundiced eye.

"Maybe I have," Gregory agreed and started walking away from the Fat Lady, Hilary following close behind him. Leaving Gryffindor Tower at a brisk pace he said, "Come on, we need to get the lacewings for the Polyjuice Potion."

"Y'know, since we're members of the faculty, we could just *ask* Snape for the ingredients," observed Hilary as they made their way down to the dungeons. "So why are we sneaking into his storeroom to steal them?"

Gregory grinned impishly and told her, "Old habit."

Harry was sitting on the corner of his bed, still in his pyjamas. Ginny was lying behind him with an arm swung around his waist, stroking his thigh with her fingers. All told it would have been a wonderful moment on any other day, but right now Harry was wondering what he had ever done in his previous lives to deserve such bad karma.

They had managed, with an audience comprising of Dean, Seamus, Moira, Carmen and Lavender, to revive the insensate Neville. Fortunately everyone was too amused by his fainting spell to ask what Ginny and Hermione were doing in Harry's bed. Unfortunately this immediately became their primary question when the newly awake Neville sputtered the reason for his passing out.

~Almost reminded me of the scene my family made when they walked in on us that first time~

remarked Ginny, sensing his train of thought.

Not half as loud though, fortunately, he agreed.

After eventually sorting things out, and promising full explanations later, the other students had dutifully filed out the dormitory to leave them in peace. Hermione had remained for several minutes to regain her composure before heading out and making her way to the sixth-year girls' dormitory in order to clean up and change for breakfast. Fortunately it was a Saturday.

"Harry?"

"Hmm?"

Ginny shifted until she was able to wind both her arms around his waist, her chin resting on his shoulder. Comfortable, she asked curiously, "If your eyes were closed, how did you know it was Hermione and not me you were holding?"

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Harry paused, considering whether or not to tell the truth. He had seen Ginny's temper flare up on several occasions and most certainly did not want to be on the receiving end. In the end though he decided to come clean and so he asked her, "Remember that time when Fred and George were teasing us?"

"Which one specifically? They tease us a lot."

"They wanted to hear if I knew for a fact that you Weasleys are natural redheads," elaborated Harry, feeling a ghost of the fierce blush brought on by that particular tease of the twins.

"Oh," Ginny said.

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. .

"Oh," Ginny said again, only this time with comprehension of his meaning.

Her grip around his waist tightened for a moment. She released him and shuffled to sit next to him, taking one of his hands in hers as she did. Harry looked at her and smiled apologetically.

"How are you going to explain this to Ron when he wakes up?" she asked.

"I don't know," Harry admitted, "but I'll come up with a bright idea before then."

Ginny grinned and offered, "If he tries to hurt you, you can always hide in my bed."

"Thanks, love. But I don't think we need to worry. Ron may be a little hot-headed at times, but he's an understanding bloke," Harry said with total confidence. Then he shook his head and sighed, "He'll probably try and kill me, won't he?"

"Yep."

He sighed again, "I certainly hope he's in a good mood when he wakes up."

"Hey you two, what's taking so long?" called Hermione from the doorway, sounding very cheerful and in decidedly better spirits. She stuck her head in the room and implored them, "Hurry it up will you, I'm famished!"

"A very good mood."

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10. The Spread of Chaos

Summer had finally been blown out like a candle confronting the northern winds that ushered in the chill beginnings of autumn. The sky was covered in a low blanket of leaden grey clouds that brought with them a bitter and continuous drizzle. The rain would fall in sheets which billowed out at the occasional gust of wind.

The full moon was lost from sight behind the low ceiling of dark clouds this night, save for a soft glow in that region of the sky. The seemingly endless light rain had dwindled down to almost nothing, allowing the Death Eaters gathered in the forest clearing some comfort.

It was a small congregation, only a dozen or so, of the lower ranking Death Eaters. They had been summoned together by the Dark Lord and charged with the task of striking a small wizarding hamlet on the other side of the woods. Under the cover of the darkness and the trees, the Death Eaters would easily be able to wreak havoc upon the unsuspecting villagers, all of whom Lord Voldemort had deemed unworthy to live under his rule.

"Are we going to get a move on any time *soon*?" asked one, a relatively new recruit, called Thomas.

"Yes, it's almost time," confirmed Avery, the most senior Death Eater present. He had served Lord Voldemort during his previous reign of terror and had been chosen to lead this raid. He lifted up his hand and motioned for the other Death Eaters to gather round.

As they came together in the centre of the clearing, a frigid wind rushed unexpectedly through the air. The Death Eaters huddled together, trying to ignore the freezing cold and the stirring of the air in the clearing.

Avery waited to make sure they were all paying attention, or something similar, then spoke. "Very, well, let's get started. The village is three miles south of us, through the forest. Once we're there we'll split up; one per house. Check every room, kill anything you find, then move on to the next building. Remember, our Lord demands *no survivors*. Not even pets."

"I just hope this mist doesn't get too thick," muttered someone. "I don't want to get lost and spend the rest of the night wandering around the forest."

The group looked around them and saw that a fine mist was indeed beginning to encroach upon the edges of the clearing. Its milky white haze was rolling through the gaps between the trees, keeping close to the ground.

"The Ministry Weather Service never said *anything* about fog," complained Thomas with an audible whine in his voice.

"Idiots," cursed Avery.

The fog continued to drift into the clearing, seemingly at an accelerated pace. It was no longer hugging the earth, but was now sweeping towards the Death Eaters in banks that were obscuring everything caught within them.

"Thick for this time of year, don't you think?"

By now the Death Eaters were beginning to twitter nervously as the thick mass of vapour had completely surrounded them. It was not a plain and featureless wall, but instead churned and swirled

around them as if it were a living thing.

There was also a sudden silence that seemed to have fallen over the woods. The wind was no longer whistling softly through the trees. The trees themselves were quiet, their branches and leaves still. The few owls and night birds that had been filling the background with faint sounds were now silent.

It was an unnerving, unnatural silence.

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"This fog..." muttered the solitary female Death Eater in the group, a young woman by the name of Lauren. She was standing in a tense posture and was nervously fingering her wand. "I don't like the feel of it."

"Where'd it come from?" asked Thomas, looking about in puzzlement. "I don't understand..."

Avery, who had a cold shiver running up and down his spine, pushed through the tight knot of nervous young Death Eaters. He pulled off his mask and sneered, glaring out in the shifting wall of fog that surrounded them. "Simpletons! Isn't it obvious? It's a trap, and we've been caught in it."

"That's right, Avery. Caught like animals," confirmed a drawling voice. The Death Eaters spun about, searching for the speaker, but unable to find him in the thickening fog. The air now had a chill that penetrated their robes and cloaks. An unnatural chill. Then, as if emerging from the depths of a shadow, he appeared before them.

It was a Thestral. One of the rarest breeds of winged horses known to the wizarding world and considered by many to be a sign of ill fortune. It was massive, standing taller than a full-grown man at its shoulder. Its coat was the pitch black of the darkest night, and it emerged from the fog like a spectre, jets of steam billowing from its nostrils.

Sitting astride its broad back was a man cloaked in what seemed to be living shadows, hiding him from view even as he urged his supposedly untameable steed towards the apprehensive clutch of Death Eaters.

Elegant, but pale white hands emerged from the depths of the darkness and reached up to throw back the cowl which hid the rider's face from sight. The hood fell back, revealing his sharp and aristocratic features, topped in crown of silvery hair. His eyes were now an impenetrable black that seemed impossibly deep, almost without end.

Draco Malfoy smirked. "And now it's time for the slaughter."

"*Avada Kedavra!*" shouted Avery, drawing his wand and levelling it at Draco. He knew that his Lord had transformed the Malfoy heir into... something. He knew that Draco had managed to battle with Potter and emerge unscathed. He knew that Voldemort would in all likelihood be displeased with him for killing Draco. He knew that the young wizard was being completely serious, despite his playful tone.

The green flash of the Killing Curse streaked through the misty air, straight at Draco's chest. The young rider, sitting imperiously on his Thestral, watched the curse speed toward him with an expression of open humour. The curse hit his chest, just to the left of his heart. It splashed against the black robes that enshrouded him, writhing as it enveloped Draco in its deadly embrace.

Avery's desperate expression briefly became one of satisfaction as the curse stuck its target. A thin smile reached his lips, only to die a rapid death as Draco remained upright. His poise did not shift so much as an inch, though his mount stirred uneasily. He gazed at Avery from across the short span separating him from the small group of immobile Death Eaters.

"Wooooo... I hope I'm not supposed to be impressed," purred Draco, his black eyes flashing with evil satisfaction, "because I'm *not*."

Death Eaters, as a rule, are considered to be the vilest and most wicked witches and wizards on the face of the earth. They are expected to know no fear of anything save their master and the possibility of failing his will. They might not be combat-hardened soldiers, but they tend to be able to face down their opponents without flinching.

Naturally they turned and started running.

They broke away from each other, fleeing in all directions in an attempt to get away from the laughing form in the centre of the glade. It was not a particularly large clearing, only a rough fifty or so yards across, so it did not take them long to reach its edge. Whereupon they found that they were indeed trapped within.

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A writhing and undulating wall of black shadow rose up from the ground, reaching high into the skies above. Realizing that they could not escape through the now sealed off woods, the panicked Death Eaters managed to gather their wits enough to attempt Apparating to safety. When this failed to work, resulting in splitting headaches that hinted that their brains might start oozing out their skulls, blind terror began to consume them.

By now the fog had swept fully into the clearing and enveloped it. Everything was hidden from view and those trapped within could see from one side to the other. This helped fan the dread they were feeling, as they were unable to see what hunting them.

"Where is he? Where is he?!" asked a frantic Todd Baddock, whose younger brother Malcolm was in his third year at Hogwarts. After discovering himself unable to Apparate, he had spun around to face the centre of the clearing, keeping his back to the safety of the wall that surrounded the clearing.

"Where is he?!"

"Right behind you."

The eldest of the two Baddock boys, who had finished studying at Hogwarts the year before Harry Potter had come to the school, flinched and spun wildly around as something cold brushed against the back of his neck.

"Avada Kedavra!" he screamed, only to find himself facing down nothing but thin air.

Todd began to turn in tight circles, hoping that in doing so whatever it was stalking him would be unable to catch him unawares. Waves of terror and apprehension were breaking and frothing over him as he tried to penetrate the murky gloom of the fog surrounding him.

Before he could move to resist, something wrapped itself around his waist. A chill, colder and deeper than anything he had ever experienced seeped through his robes and into his flesh. His tried to move his arms and legs, to ward off or flee from whatever it was, but he found himself completely immobilised.

"!!!"

He tried to scream, but the coldness assailing him had clamped itself around his throat. Todd gasped for breath in short, barely audible wheezes. He pulled and pushed and twisted and stretched and wiggled and thrashed and squirmed, in desperate hope of breaking away. But he couldn't manage to tug even one hand free from his invisible assailant.

He was loose.

Todd, taken entirely by surprise at his sudden freedom, collapsed to the wet ground. He sucked in deep gasping breaths, hunched over as he lay there. He was shivering from the intense cold, which seemed to pervade his entire body.

He struggled to push himself up, but froze in mid motion as he spotted a pair of black boots standing not three feet away from him. Behind the boots, lying prone on the sodden earth, was a desiccated corpse that he vaguely recognised as one of his fellow Death Eaters.

He looked up and saw that Draco Malfoy was standing over him, his ghostly white face smiling as it seemed to hover amidst the all-encompassing blackness which surrounded him. Draco smirked at Todd and reach up to brush a hand through his thick silver hair.

"Thank you," rasped Todd, his throat raw.

Draco looked at him quizzically. "For what?"

"For letting me go."

"What makes you think I'd do that?"

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Todd knew then, in that instant, that he was going to die. When Draco squatted down next to him, his cloak of living shadows flowing around him, Todd simply closed his eyes and waited for the end to come. His last coherent thought, as a pale hand reached out to stroke his cheek, was that Lord Voldemort had never promised him anything like this.

"You are at my mercy," said a soft and almost loving whisper, "and believe me - I have *none*."

In the distance, deep within the forest's gloomy interior, a wolf howled. There was a sickening, wet noise followed by an indistinct gurgle that was barely human. The chilling howl of the wind blowing through the trees, rustling the leaves and stirring the underbrush.

All was still as the rain began to softly drizzle down.

.oOo.

Harry jerked awake, Ginny by his side. She was clasping his shoulder with one hand, digging her nails painfully into his flesh. He reached up and gently pried her hand off. She turned to look at him, her face so pale that every last one of her smattering of freckles stood out in stark relief. He licked his lips and swallowed, trying to wet the dryness of his mouth and throat.

"Dear Lord, Harry," Ginny whispered hoarsely, "he killed them all."

"Yes, I know," he agreed, "we were expecting him to go rogue, out of Voldemort's control, but I didn't think it would happen so soon."

He has clearly been spending a great deal of time communing with the Shadows within his depths, observed Isis.

The more the Well draws on his source the faster his descent into madness, agreed Sun Tzu, Ginny was breathing deeply in an effort to slow the rapid beatings of her heart. She looked at Harry and shook her head in bewilderment. "How did we see that?" she asked. "Tom wasn't there, so how did we see what was happening?"

Harry sighed and leaned back into the pillows. "I don't know."

That was the Order's doing, Harry, admitted Merlin.

Ginny looked up at Harry in surprise and asked, "You did that?"

Not ours exactly, Merlin responded. He then explained, **The Order itself is not sentient, but it does possess an awareness of sorts. It deemed it necessary for us to witness what was transpiring there.**

You saw it that too? asked Harry.

Unfortunately, replied Joan, her French accent thicker than normal.

Ginny ran her hands through her hair, throwing it back. Satisfied that her hair was out the way, she turned to Harry and asked, "So what d'we do?"

Harry glanced over at her and felt his mouth go dry again as he saw her properly. She had foregone wearing one of her nightshirts or nightdresses, choosing instead to wear a simple faded orange Chudley Cannons tee-shirt, which had once belonged to Ron. Now, thanks to the cold sweat that had gripped them both during their vision, it clung to her body in the right places, causing Harry's mind to stall momentarily. Clearing his throat, and focusing his attention above her shoulders on her face, he pondered their options for a moment.

"Professor Dumbledore has told me more than once that his door is always open," decided Harry. He stood up and started pulling on his dressing-gown, handing Ginny hers as he did so. "Let's see if that offer still stands."

They hurried out of the sixth-year boys' dormitory, not particularly worrying about whether they made much noise or not. There were so many Silencing Charms around Harry's bed and between it and the door that a herd of Hippogriffs could stampede through the room unheard.

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Harry led the way down to the common room, one of Ginny's hands grasped in his own, vaulting the stairs three at a time. It was actually quite an impressive feat that Ginny managed to keep her balance during this rushed descent. The common room was empty, as they expected it to be at two o'clock in the morning. Without pause the couple pushed open the portrait of the Fat Lady and slipped out the portrait hole.

~Ah, Harry?~ asked Ginny, after they had sneaked their way through the patrolled hallways of the school and into the final passage leading to Dumbledore's office. ~D'you know the password?~

Nope, he replied with a grin, we'll have to guess.

They stood in front of the stone gargoyle which guarded the entrance to the Headmaster's office for nearly five minutes trying to guess the password. After exhausting most of the more common wizarding sweets that they knew of, Ginny began trying to think of any obscure delicacies that could be the answer, while Harry started working through what Muggle sweet he knew.

"Mars bars?"

"Blood-flavoured lollipops?"

"Ugh. Snickers?"

"Toothflossing Stringmints?"

"Humbugs?"

With a shiver the gargoyle shifted out of the way, nodding for them to enter. Ginny beamed up at Harry as they bustled through the exposed entrance and half ran up the moving staircase. They reached the top, almost crashing into the closed door in their hurry, and nearly tripping over each other in their haste to knock on the door.

"Come in," called Dumbledore's voice through the door. Ginny twisted the doorknob and pushed the door open, stepping into the room with Harry right beside her. Dumbledore, who was standing by his fireplace, fully clothed in a set of vibrant purple robes, smiled at them. "Harry, Virginia. What brings you here at this time of the night?"

Harry, who had paused alongside Ginny just inside the doorway, took note of the room and its occupants. Professors Snape and McGonagall were seated in plush chairs in front of Dumbledore's desk and a wizard he recognised as Mundungus Fletcher, was standing on the other side of the fireplace.

"Do not worry," assured Dumbledore, "you can trust everyone present with anything you have to say." Ginny nodded their acknowledgement and then cut to the chase, stating the reason for their visit before Snape's disapproving scowl could deepen. In a bland tone of voice she said, "Draco Malfoy just killed a dozen of Tom's Death Eaters."

She could not have achieved greater consternation if she had tossed a rampaging Chimera into the room and slammed the door shut. Snape was out of his chair in a swish of black robes, while McGonagall had clutched a hand to her breasts. Fletcher, who had been smoking on an old, decrepitlooking pipe, started choking after hitching his breath at the wrong time.

"I see," said Dumbledore gravely, peering at the two teenagers over the rims of his spectacles.

"Perhaps you could be so kind as to-"

The headmaster was interrupted as Fawkes, his Phoenix, hopped of his stand in the corner and glided across the room to settle on Harry's shoulder.

"Hullo, Fawkes," Harry greeted as the Phoenix made himself comfortable.

~Lord Phoenix. Lady Phoenix~ trilled the crimson and gold bird, dipping its head, ~It is gratifying to see you both here on this troubled night.~

"Thank you, Fawkes," Ginny returned, "but what do you mean, 'troubled'?"

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~Albus and the others have been waiting~ replied Fawkes, nodding his head towards the others in the room. ~Severus brought warning of an attack to come. Remus, Sirius and others of our cause are laying in wait to challenge the Dark Lord's followers.~

Dumbledore was staring at the two students, and his Phoenix, with frank astonishment as Fawkes finished explaining. He shared a look with McGonagall and Snape, before shaking his head and then clearing his throat. "The two of you can understand Fawkes?"

Harry and Ginny simply nodded. Dumbledore shook his head once again, with a tired smile, and then asked them, "So, once again, what brings your here at such an early hour?"

"Is what Fawkes told us true?" asked Harry in return. "Are Sirius and Remus waiting to ambush some Death Eaters?"

"That's right," grumbled Snape, looking decidedly unhappy.

Harry shared a look with Ginny. She said, "You'd better get them out of there. Now. Draco just killed all the Death Eaters that were gathering in the forest by the village and I don't think he would be opposed to killing any of our people as well."

Alternating with each other, Harry and Ginny began to take turns explaining what they had seen in their vision. With help from the Order they were able to recall great amounts of details and Harry was able to identify Avery as the leading Death Eater. By the time they were finished, not once having been interrupted, the faces of all four adults were grave.

"I'd always hoped, always believed, that Draco would be able to escape his father's shadow," asserted Snape, sinking into his chair. He sighed dejectedly, as if defeated, "It would seem I may have been

mistaken."

At least I lived long enough to hear that! thought Harry. This took Ginny by surprise and she was unable to repress a short burst of giggles that earned her puzzled looks from Dumbledore, McGonagall and Fletcher. Snape simply glared at her, which in turn gave her cause to glare at Harry, blaming him for her lapse.

"What?" he asked, trying to lighten the mood. "I didn't say a thing."

"What are we going to do in the mean time?" Ginny asked Harry as they stepped out from behind the gargoyles leading to Dumbledore's office.

"I was thinking we could maybe stop by the kitchens on our way," suggested Harry.

Ginny looked at him incredulously. "You can't be hungry after that."

"No," he admitted, "but I was thinking that maybe a nice hot cup of mint tea would help me get back to sleep." He looked at her and raised his eyebrows in a suggestive manner. "Or at least present us with something to while away the hours before breakfast."

"Harry Potter, what *are* you suggesting?" she asked in an innocent tone as they quietly walked down the corridor, silhouetted in the flickering torchlight.

"Nothing," Harry replied in an equally innocent voice.

Ginny shook her head and coyly asked, "So, when we get back into bed, you're going to behave yourself?"

He pretended to think about it before admitting, "Probably not."

"Good."

The two teenagers strolled down the hallway, arms linked around each others waists. The faint murmur of their conversation grew steadily softer as they moved away.

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Neither of them noticed a pair of cloaked figures detach from one shadowy corner which offered a clear view of the entrance to Dumbledore's office. The figures, cautiously keeping out of the scattered torchlight, watched until Harry and Ginny disappeared from view.

"Come on," said Gregory Proteus, motioning his wife in the general direction of their quarters. "I'm going to get a big pot of black coffee ready."

"I thought you hated coffee," observed Hilary as they started walking.

Gregory nodded and then gave her a helpless shrug as he explained, "I do, but I remember being exceptionally bouncy next week and my excuse was that I indulged in great quantities of extra strong coffee."

"I thought you refused to believe that the future is predetermined."

Gregory's smile as a wan one. "This isn't the future, love."

Dumbledore was slightly perturbed by the fact that, for the first time in many years, he had missed breakfast in the Great Hall. He had simply not shown up, choosing instead to remain in his office and spend the time rapping his knuckles pensively against the top of his impressive oak desk, Fawkes perched behind him on the tall back of his chair.

His mind was wandering about, thoughtfully contemplating recent events. The past, the present and the future were all becoming entwined, affecting each other in ways that he had not expected or prepared for. So many unforeseen developments had presented themselves over the summer and first week of term that the proverbial chessboard had effectively been swept clear.

Gregory and Hilary Proteus, showing up on his doorstep with the most unlikely tale he thought he would ever hear, but vouched for by a letter he could not refuse.

The revelation that Draco Malfoy was now the wizarding equivalent of a Muggle time bomb, with more than enough destructive power to bring about the end of the world.

A hundred witches and wizards dead, but no signs or indications that anyone had been missed. Was Cornelius truly so blind or did he ulterior motives, as Percy Weasley suggested?

Severus' report that Voldemort was frankly delighted by the success of his sacrificial lamb, but also troubled with the news that Draco had failed to return.

The imminent withdrawal of Hermione from Hogwarts. It would be the loss of possibly the brightest witch to have attended the school, yet he could do nothing to prevent it.

Harry and Ginny's recent assertion that Draco Malfoy had indeed gone rogue, apparently having decided that Voldemort would make a better servant than master.

Remus and Sirius' confirmation that a dozen Death Eaters had been found dead three miles north of the where they'd been lying in wait. All twelve had been brutally butchered.

Yes, the chessboard had definitely been swept clear. In fact, it was now an entirely different game with entirely different rules. And, if the Defence Against the Dark Arts professors were to be believed, the stakes had just become that much higher as well. Even worse was the problem that a great many of the pieces were not obviously white or black anymore and were moving about the board of their own volition.

"Professor Dumbledore?"

Dumbledore looked up at the voice and soft knock. Standing just in the entrance to his office was Fleur Delacour, Hogwarts' new professor of Ancient Runes. The striking young woman, her luxurious long blonde hair done up in a professional yet elegant French twist, was waiting for Dumbledore to bid her entry into his domain.

"Ah, Fleur," he greeted, "come in, come in. What brings you here?"

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"I 'ave news on ze assignment you gave me," she said, walking up to his desk. Dumbledore saw that she was holding a manila folder in her slim hand. "Ze stone tableet zat William brought to uz for translating at ze start of ze summer. It eez nearly complete. I 'ave 'ere ze preliminary work." The elderly wizard smiled as Fleur mentioned Bill Weasley by his full name. He had noticed that the two seemed quite taken by each other when they had spoken in his office. Taking the folder Fleur held out to him, Dumbledore briefly recalled his meeting with Bill at the start of the summer holidays, only minutes before Molly had frantically called him through the fireplace with news of Vernon Dursley's attack on Harry.

"Excellent work, Fleur," he praised. He set the folder to one side of his desk and planned to owl Bill sometime before lunch to let him know the work was almost completed. He smiled across the desk at her and asked, "Would you care to join me for a cup of tea, my dear?"

"Non, Professor," Fleur refused. She indicated the unopened folder. "I zink it would be best if you read ze translation, Professor."

Dumbledore saw the faint signs of apprehension in Fleur's stance and manner as she picked the folder off his desk and handed it back to him. There was a tightness around her mouth and eyes and he felt himself becoming slightly concerned about what Fleur's translation said that could possibly worry her so much.

He opened the folder and pulled out a sheet of crisp parchment. Fleur's neat copperplate filled the page, line after line. The bulk of the writing was done in a royal blue ink, but there were short annotations scattered about in deep red, like blood. As his eyes scanned down the page, Dumbledore began to realize what had caused the young quarter Veela's agitation.

"If this is an accurate translation..." he muttered, brows furrowed deeply.

"Trust me, it is," she assured.

Dumbledore drew an unsteady breath. "Then Harry is going to die."

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11. Tricks of Conversation

The many trees of the Forbidden Forest loomed high above them, their dark trunks casting long and deep shadows under the late afternoon sun. Here, near the edge of the forest, bordering on the village of Hogsmeade, the trees were not packed so densely, thus allowing a measure of sunlight to penetrate through their canopy of branches. Shafts of rich gold slanted down from above, glowing softly and providing such a stately atmosphere that those who ventured into the forest at this time were often put in mind of a grand cathedral.

"Yes, it does almost look something like that," agreed Harry, when Ginny voiced this observation. He and Ginny were strolling serenely down the path they had found earlier.

Ginny turned her head to look at him and, seeing the peaceful smile on his face, wished that her Animagus form was able to smile so that she could join him. It was now the end of October and Halloween had crept up on them all. Harry, as a treat for the occasion, had arranged permission from Professor Dumbledore for Ginny and him to enter the Forest. They had gone under the pretence of wanting to practice and hone their Animagus transformations, which they had not been able to perform since leaving the Burrow.

They had spent the bulk of the day leisurely walking through the depths of the Forbidden Forest. After finding a nice, large clearing several miles into the forest, they had lunched on a small picnic basket Dobby had prepared for them. The couple had then spent several hours lounging on the grass and making up for the myriad interruptions that always seemed to plague them when they were together at the school.

Now as the sun was dipping low above the horizon, they were making their way to Hogsmeade from which they would follow the path up to Hogwarts. Ginny, whose Animagus was smaller than Harry's and thus able to navigate between the forest trees, had transformed for the short trip.

It's a good thing we have this bond, she told Harry as they approached the edge of the forest. Through the trees they were just able to see some of Hogsmeade's buildings. *Otherwise you'd never be able to understand me when I'm like this.*

"Hmmm. At least we now have a use for it beyond helping you cheat at Muggle Studies," observed Harry teasingly, stroking her side with one hand.

Since they were now almost clear of the forest Ginny changed back and turned her brown eyes to Harry with a mischievous grin. "I won't tell anyone if you don't."

They emerged from the forest a short distance, a wide grassy field and two short hills, from the outskirts of Hogsmeade. Ginny could see the thin trails of smoke that indicated which houses and buildings had fires burning in their hearths. Half a mile to the east, if what Harry said was accurate, was the rocky path leading up to the cave Sirius had hidden in during the Triwizard Tournament. After crossing the wide and empty field, which during the spring and summer was overrun with flowers of every colour, and climbing over and down the twin hills that rolled between the forest and the village they entered Hogsmeade from behind the newly rebuilt Post Office.

Ginny noticed as they stepped into the street that Harry's shoulders were tensed up and a grim look had covered his face and entered his eyes. She could understand why, having shared his nightmares and remembering the screams of the owls trapped within the old Post Office, which had been burnt to the ground during the Death Eater attack the previous Christmas.

She was in the act of reaching out to slip a comforting arm around his waist as they walked when they were almost bowled off their feet. A diminutive and rotund man with a meticulously trimmed and maintained black moustache, stomped passed them with short, mincing steps. He was dressed in an

immaculate grey suit and bowler hat, with a pink carnation and silver tipped walking stick.

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He was being followed by two tall men. The one was wearing a reasonably well tailored suit, but not nearly as high class as the short man, and was looking particularly confused. The other man, also moustached but less meticulously so, was wearing a rumpled, off-the-rack suit under a rumpled and seemingly well used trench coat and was looking just as confused as his compatriot.

"-such impudence!" Ginny heard the short man exclaim in what sounded like a French accent. He was scowling fiercely as he and his companions walked on without pausing. "I am not a bloody little frog... I am a bloody little Belgian!"

"What a peculiar little man," she declared as the trio rounded a corner and vanished from sight. Harry, standing beside her with an arm slung across her shoulders, chuckled and held her close to him as they resumed their return to Hogwarts.

There was a slight wind blowing, typical of the autumn weather. It was not particularly cold, but cool enough to necessitate the use of cloaks and Molly Weasley's woollen jumpers when outdoors. The path up to the castle was muddy, it had rained nearly the entirety of the previous week and there was still the occasional thundershower in the late evenings.

"The cabaret should have started 'bout half an hour ago," noted Harry as they walked, checking his watch.

"Pity we have to make an appearance," groaned Ginny. "After all, I've always wanted to listen to my classmates screaming up an ungodly racket."

What does your classmates' singing have to do with us? asked Osiris.

Something insidious no doubt, decided a jocular Loki.

Heracles, of course, had to add, **I think we should be insulted by this...**

Hogwarts' gates were looming ahead of Harry and Ginny by now, so the two ignored the private cabaret act that was going on in their heads and walked up to the school's front entrance. There were a few students milling around the Entrance Hall, clustered in small groups and talking. Some of them waved or called hello, but there was nobody present that the pair needed to stop and talk to. From the partially opened doors leading into the Great Hall, was coming an awful racket that sounded to Ginny not unlike the wailing cry of a full-grown Mandrake.

How do you know what that sounds like? asked Romulus, having overheard Ginny's uncharitable comparison. **If you'd actually heard a Mandrake you'd be dead.**

It's just a figure speech, Rom, she told him. As she and Harry approached the hall she asked him, "Do we have to?"

"Unfortunately," he told her, placing one hand on the small of her back and guiding her into the hall, following immediately behind her.

Since the end of September, when Draco Malfoy had first struck against Voldemort's Death Eaters, there had been attacks reported every few days. Roughly half of the attacks, according to evidence gathered by the Ministry, were the work of Death Eaters. They attacked in groups of six to a dozen, targeting single homes or particular streets. They struck during the dead of night and launched the Dark Mark when finished.

The other half of the attacks, despite whatever the Ministry might say, was solely the work of Draco Malfoy. He seemed to attack randomly, without provocation or reason. When the Death Eaters hit a target, people sometimes survived and called for help, or the Dark Mark would alert others that an attack had taken place. When Malfoy attacked it was silent, swift and utterly deadly. There were never survivors and nobody was aware the attack had taken place until they came looking for the victims when they turned up missing.

Even though Malfoy's presence was not officially acknowledged, he and the Death Eaters were creating an atmosphere of alarm and terror that had settling heavily over the wizarding community.

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Thus, in one of his not too rare moments of insanity, Dumbledore had decided to try and bolster student morale at Hogwarts by holding a Halloween Cabaret celebration. Naturally everyone with the exception of Dumbledore thought this was a terrible idea. The only redeeming feature, which was doubtless the only reason why anybody had cared to enter, was the first place prize of fifty Galleons and a free full-course meal at the Three Broomsticks.

Entering the Great Hall, Harry and Ginny saw a pair of second year Ravenclaw girls finishing a short piece that was a brutally butchered version of a popular Weird Sisters song. Once they were done, as Harry and Ginny were approaching the Gryffindor table to join Hermione, the master of ceremonies and his assistant took to the stage.

One of the Death Eater attacks two weeks prior had led to Professor Sprout's cousin and his wife being badly injured and their house destroyed. As such the Herbology professor had taken a leave of absence and was currently being substituted by short and fat man, who despite his name, was of Greek ancestry. He was currently wearing green and white striped robes, with a vibrant looking robe of white, black and orange thrown over his sloping shoulders.

This was Professor Arbuckle Bootle-Bumtrinket, accompanied by his very nervous and reluctant assistant, Neville Longbottom.

"Ah, yes," announced Neville, a Sonorus Charm causing his normally timid voice to carry to the very back of the hall. He looked as though he had just been through a harrowing Potions lesson with Snape.

"Thank you, uh, Megan and Gabby from, er, Ravenclaw for that... inspiring... rendition."

Loki snorted and remarked sarcastically, **Ah, inspiring. So that's what that it's called. For a moment I thought young Virginia was correct and it was indeed a pair of Mandrakes.**

~Hush now, Loki~ Harry told the voice as he and Ginny sat down. ~Your own singing talent is nothing to brag about.~

"Quite right, Mr Longbottom," agreed Bootle-Bumtrinket as he stood beside Neville with a piece of parchment in his hands. He looked just as unenthusiastic to be up on the stage as his student did. He looked down at the parchment he was holding and read off, "Next we will be presenting a pair of sixth-year Slytherin boys."

Harry, Ginny and Hermione shared an alarmed look.

"-Vincent Crabbe and Gregory Goyle. Please give them a welcoming hand."

The two hulking boys, wearing the same green dress robes from the Yule Ball two years before, lumbered onto the stage. Apparently they had managed to squeeze into the robes with the aid of an Enlargement Charm on the material in order to make up for two years of growth. The robes were still a poor fit however and seemed in danger of splitting at any sudden movement. They paused by the small band, which Dumbledore had procured from the Hogsmeade village court, obviously instructing them on what tune to play. They then moved to the stage centre, passing Neville and Bootle-Bumtrinket as they departed, and visibly prepared themselves.

With an audible, and highly theatrical, clearing of his throat, Goyle began to sing.

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"O Paddy was an Irishman,

He came from Donegal,

And all the girls they loved him well,

Though he only had one ball,

For the Irish girls are girls of sense,

And they didn't mind at all,

For as Paddy pointed out to them,

'Twas better than none at all.

O folderol and folderay,

A sailor's life is grim,

So you're only too delighted,

If you get a bit excited,

Whether it's with her or him."

Ginny found herself unable to do anything but gape in dumbstruck horror as Crabbe joined in for the chorus. The bulky Slytherin was holding his hands to his chest and attempting to project his voice in an operatic manner. He was not succeeding. With wide eyes, Ginny shared a look with Harry that clearly spoke of their mutual desire to disappear to somewhere other than the Great Hall. Anywhere. She turned to ask Hermione if the earlier acts had been as bad, as dreadful, but found that her friend had acted true to form. Being the thoughtful witch that she was, Hermione had come to the cabaret fully prepared. Somehow she had acquired a pair of the massive earmuffs used by students when dealing with Mandrakes in Herbology.

O Circe, she thought, turning back to where Goyle was starting on the second verse, *I would give just about anything for a pair of those right now.*

~Give a little extra~ Harry told her, ~I want a pair as well.~

"O Blodwyn was a Welsh girl,

She came from Cardiff city,

And all the boys they loved her well,

Though she only had one titty,

For the Welsh boys there are boys of sense,

And didn't they all agree,

One titty is better than two sometimes,

For it leaves your one hand free.

O folderol and folderay,

A sailor's life is grim,

So you're only too delighted,

If you get a bit excited,

Whether it's with her or him."

Ginny contemplated the idea of casting a Silencing Charm around the Gryffindor table, but she lost her train of thought when she spotted Seamus out the corner of her eye. He was sitting between Moira and Dean and had, for reasons best known only to himself, large and richly yellow chunks of cheddar stuffed into his ears.

What the devil is that Irish boy up to? asked Isis' voice.

"Blame it on the Butterbeer," explained Dean, seeing Ginny's bewildered expression.

"Listening to this racket, I'm almost tempted to try that myself," commented Harry, who had looked to see what had caught Ginny's attention.

Moira propped her chin on her hands and stared at the stage with a resigned expression on her face.

"Yeh noo soomthin'?" she said with a sigh. "After a' while o' thi', th' concept' o' dyin' becooms verra, verra appealin'."

Seamus, cheese firmly embedded, asked, "Eh?"

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"O Gertrude was an English lass,

She came from Stoke-on-Trent,

But when she loved a nice young lad,

She always left him bent..."

Fortunately an escape presented itself to Ginny and her friends in the timely appearance of one of the many Aurors permanently stationed at Hogwarts. Since the attack on Hogsmeade the previous Christmas, Harry had managed to blackmail, er, bluff, Minister Fudge into having a full division of Aurors assigned to the school. Harry and Ginny, who stepped out of Gryffindor Tower every night for an hour or two to patrol around the grounds and assess state of the defensive wards, had become reasonably familiar with many of the Aurors.

"Harry, Ginny," greeted a young Auror called Victor when he reached them. He had long, curly brown hair that was drawn into a messy ponytail as well as an unkempt goatee that did not suit him. Ginny had come to the conclusion that he had only allowed the facial hair grown in because he was too lazy to shave, or charm, it off every morning.

"Hey, Vic," greeted Harry, turning away from the travesty of song that currently occupied the stage. He asked, "What brings you into this cacophony?"

Victor winced as Crabbe hit a particularly off-key note in the chorus. "Duncan wanted me to let you know that your 'guest' has arrived. McTaggart has taken her down to your office so she can wait for you."

Ginny exchanged an eager look with Harry and Hermione. It had been nearly two months since Harry had asked Hermione to write a letter to their 'guest' as Victor put it. They had discussed this plan of Harry's before and, while Ginny and Hermione were somewhat dubious, it had enough merits to warrant an attempt.

Plus it was the perfect excuse to leave the show early.

"O Angus was a Scottish lad,

He came from Aberdeen..."

"Ach, bluddie Hades," groaned Moira, "nae Scotland as well..."

"Come on," Harry said as he stood up. He grabbed both Ginny and Hermione by their arms and urged them to their feet. "Let's get a move on before they start singing about any countries on the continent."

Having vacated the Great Hall with all due haste, Hermione, Harry and Ginny proceeded to the third floor corridor and down the stairs to the Practical Fighting Techniques area. They reached the small antechamber at the foot of the stairs.

Before them stood the three large doorways that led into the auditorium. They were bare, stripped of the large oak doors that had once stood there and gaping at them like some empty, mocking eye sockets of a grotesque skull. Through the open entryway, Hermione could see the insides of the auditorium. For the most part the physical repairs were all but complete, requiring only a few cosmetic touches to finish returning the room to a pristine condition.

The auditorium was only incomplete in the eyes of Harry and Ginny, who were still working on a wide variety of wards, charms and only the two of them knew what else. Apparently, though nobody else laid any blame at their feet, the couple both considered Draco Malfoy's rampage and its consequences to be their responsibility. As such they were working near constantly, at least one hour a day, in the room to prevent any dark magicks, in any form, from gaining entrance. Until they were satisfied, the once nightly Practical Fighting Techniques classes would be on hold.

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Dumbledore had offered the use of the Great Hall as a substitute until renovations of the auditorium were complete. The two young instructors had declined however, preferring to wait for the work to be fully finished. It was, they said, more a symbolic act than anything else. Still, as a temporary measure, Practical Fighting Techniques had been evolved, or perhaps even devolved, into a Duelling Club. It was a similar concept to the one Gilderoy Lockhart had tried to get started three years earlier, but far more successful.

Not difficult without his bumbling attempts to teach making a hash of everything, Hermione thought, her eyes wandering over and through the yawning doorways into the cavernous auditorium.

The club would meet every Monday night after dinner and was open to all students, from first to seventh-years. As a general rule the various years were kept separated unless the student showed sufficient aptitude and skill to be placed with more advanced students. Unsurprisingly, to those that knew her, Moira Mackay had rapidly left her fellow fourth years behind and was now on par with most of the more proficient fifth-years. Dean and Seamus had started a betting pool as to when she would be promoted to duel against the sixth-years.

Matches and scoring were supervised by Harry, Ginny, Hermione, Professors McGonagall, Snape and the husband and wife Defence teachers, which led to some interesting moments as the teachers tended to back particular students. Professor Snape was the more often than not loser in these bets and challenges, and almost always to one of the Proteuses, much to his annoyance.

Hermione turned away from the auditorium as they walked, repressing a slight shudder at the memory of the stone ceiling giving way. She looked to one side of the three doorways, to where a single, innocuous door was set into the wall, leading into Harry's office. Outside, waiting for them to arrive was the Auror who had escorted the person they were meeting.

Ami McTaggart was a young woman with long, straight red hair, deep blue eyes and a bit of an Irish accent. Ami was one of the youngest Aurors stationed at Hogwarts. She had been a seventh-year Ravenclaw during Harry's first-year and had only completed her Auror training and been posted on active duty two years before.

"Hi, Harry!" she called as she spotted them approaching. "Hello, Ginny, Hermione!"

"Hello, Ami," greeted Harry. "Is she here?"

The young Auror's face darkened in a disapproving scowl. "Aye, she's waiting in your office. Though why you'd ever want to speak with *her* I don't know. She's never been anything but a gossipmonger." *That's what I'm afraid of.*

Hermione wasn't all that certain they should be having discussions with her either, but Harry had put forth a persuasive argument. He shrugged nonchalantly and told Ami, "We're just checking to see if she might not have any information for us."

"Okay," accepted Ami reluctantly. "In any case, I've got to get back to my post by the gates. If you need anything else, just give a yell."

"We'll yell, scream, shout, holler and set off Fillibuster Fireworks," declared Ginny with one of those impish grins that loudly proclaimed her to be related to the notorious Fred and George.

Ami, shaking her head, departed and made her way up the winding staircase leading up. Harry waited until she had disappeared from sight before reaching for the handle and pushing the door open and waving the two girls inside.

Once more unto the breach, Hermione thought humourlessly as they stepped into the office.

"Hermione, are you all right?" asked the woman sitting brazenly behind Harry's desk. She was playing with one blonde curl, her gaudy spectacles perched on the very end of her nose and her feet propped on the desktop, next to her crocodile-skin handbag. She smirked wickedly and continued in a saccharine tone, "You're looking ghoulish, even for Halloween."

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"Rita," acknowledged Hermione, gritting her teeth and resisting the urge to reach for her wand and hex the columnist to kingdom come.

Harry stepped up, resting a calming hand on Hermione's shoulder. He glared silently at Rita Skeeter with the full force of his blazing green eyes. Hermione was gratified to see the older witch swallow nervously and take her feet off Harry's desk. The columnist shifted uncomfortably and then reached for her handbag, her long nails gleaming scarlet as she did.

"Don't bother, Ms Skeeter," Harry told her, forestalling her from opening her bag and pulling out any parchment and her Quick-Quotes Quill. He leaned forward, resting both fists on the desk and seemed to loom over her. "This isn't an interview. This is a business proposition."

"A proposition?" asked Rita snidely, apparently making an attempt at recovering from Harry's fierce stare. She leaned back in Harry's chair and steepled her fingers. "And just what do you wish to talk about, Harry? How can a humble reporter such as myself lend aid to the famous Boy-Who-Lived?" *Die*, was the first suggestion to enter Hermione's head. Unfortunately Harry had other ideas of the snobbish woman.

"First, get the hell out of my chair," he ground out, waving his hand between them. With a soft pop Rita disappeared from view, leaving Harry's chair to swing back and forth from the sudden loss of weight resting in it. An identical pop sounded off to one side and Rita reappeared, still in her seated position, but without a chair to support her. With a thump she hit the floor.

"Second," declared Harry, rounding the desk and taking his seat. He motioned Hermione and Ginny to make themselves comfortable. "Shut up and let me do the talking."

Rita stumbled to her feet, glaring viciously at Harry. "Why in the seven rings of hell should I do that?" Harry leaned back in his chair and arched an eyebrow at her. His voice took on the same sickly sweet tone Rita had been using earlier when he answered, "Because if you help me, I will help you. The biggest, most exposing, most far-reaching, most acclaimed story you will ever write."

"I'm listening," said Rita as she warily approached the desk. With another wave of his hand Harry conjured up an extra chair for her to sit in, but made sure to keep it a little bit separated from Hermione and Ginny's chairs. Rita sank into it and kept her eyes on Harry, her expression a closed one.

"Have you heard about what has happened to Draco Malfoy?" asked Ginny, drawing Rita's attention away from Harry.

The woman nodded. "Of course. The Ministry isn't letting the press print anything though - they say they want to prevent a panic - but I have a fair idea about this Well of Shadows you told Dumbledore all about."

How does she know what Harry told Dumbledore? thought Hermione with some alarm. As far as she knew the details of Draco's transformation into the Well had not yet been made public.

"D'you know what's required to create a Well of Shadows?" asked Harry. When Rita shook her head, he shifted in his seat and leaned forward, propping his elbows on the desk. "Among other things it needs the blood and magic sacrifice of one hundred witches and wizards."

"Impossible!" Rita exclaimed, looking surprised. She shook her head disparagingly. "It couldn't be done. I hear almost everything of consequence that goes on in this country and believe me; I'd know it if a hundred people were killed all at once. There's no way nobody found out about such a slaughter. It's simply not possible."

"Perhaps," admitted Harry. "That's why we asked you here tonight."

Ginny stood up and sat on the corner of Harry's desk. "So far we've come up with four possible explanations. One: Tom - Lord Voldemort - has been sneaky about it. He acquired the people he needed for the sacrifice from overseas, possibly over a long period of time, so that nobody in our Ministry would be aware that something had happened."

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"Possible, but why bother?" observed Harry.

Hermione turned in her chair, to face Rita more directly, and continued, "Two: the sacrifices did come from Britain. One hundred witches and wizards were killed here, on this island, only the Ministry and

Fudge are too stupid to notice."

"Also possible," admitted Harry, "but unlikely."

The dialogue turned back to Ginny. "Three: The Ministry, that is Minister Fudge, did notice the loss, but have been suppressing the information because they don't want to cause a panic. Very much like why they're reluctant to allow any disclosure about Malfoy and his transformation into the Well of Shadows."

"Very likely, but if true then why hasn't the Minister or his people told *us* or any of our people about it? He has instructions to keep us informed in any matters that might possibly pertain to Voldemort and his followers," noted Harry.

"Four," finished Hermione, "Fudge and his lot have noticed the missing people but are suppressing the information out of spite for Harry and Professor Dumbledore. Or possibly an ulterior motive, beyond simple pettiness, that we are unaware of."

Harry looked intently at Rita. "This is why I asked for Hermione to request you come here. We need someone to dig into this mess and find out the truth. Is Fudge just an incompetent idiot or is he withholding his knowledge? If he is, then why?"

Rita looked at the three students incredulously. "So you chose *me*?"

"Who better?" asked Hermione, hating what she was about to say. "You seem to have a talent for digging up dirt on people, finding whatever skeletons they have in their closets. If anyone can ferret out what Fudge is up to..."

"What exactly do you have in mind?"

Harry quickly finished his discussion with Rita Skeeter. Their plans for digging into Minister Fudge's activities were finalised and he sent her on her way after what was probably the single most polite and candid conversation he had ever had with *The Daily Prophet* journalist. Of course, that was not saying all that much considering his previous encounters with her.

Shortly after she left, there was a soft knock on the door to Harry's office. Ginny, who had been pacing restlessly, quickly opened the door and let Remus Lupin inside. Following on Remus' heels was the large, shaggy black form of Snuffles. Once the door was closed, Sirius transformed and was greeted by Harry with a firm hug.

"You okay, Harry?" he asked as they separated.

"I've been better," Harry replied wryly. "We all have."

Sirius sighed and ran a hand through his tousled hair, "I'm sorry it took us so long to get here."

"Don't let it bother you, Sirius," Ginny said, indicating for the two men to seat themselves. "We understand that you had your hands full keeping an eye on Tom and his Death Eater's movements."

Remus, taking a seat next to Hermione, asked, "How's Ron? Any changes in his condition?"

Hermione answered quietly, "No."

Sirius knelt down beside her chair and rested a hand on her shoulder, giving a comforting squeeze as he told her, "Don't worry about it, Hermione. You know Ron, even when he's down he doesn't ever give up. Remember when I broke his leg and he still tried to fight me off?"

"Thanks, Sirius," Hermione replied. She looked at him gratefully, but tears were glistening in her eyes.

"It's just so hard not being able to talk to him. To be with him."

"We know," Remus told her from her other side. "We know."

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I hate this feeling, Harry thought, watching as his godfather and sometime professor comforted his friend. *I hate feeling so utterly helpless.*

~Harry~ Ginny chided him. She had come around the desk and seated herself, to his embarrassment, on Harry's lap. She made certain to wiggle about quite a bit too before settling down comfortably.

Harry showed his slight disapproval by playfully poking at her ribs with a finger.

"How long with you be staying?" asked Ginny, wiggling about again, this time to avoid the finger

Harry was tickling her with.

"Only a few days, I'm afraid," admitted Sirius unhappily.

Remus nodded. "Dumbledore wants us to make a trip to Paris, and after that to Dublin. We've been told by Snape that Voldemort is preparing a gathering of vampires in both cities."

Harry nodded thoughtfully. "Paris is supposed to be one of the favourite nightspots for vampires, I guess the French cuisine appeals to them. I don't know about Dublin though, that seems a bit out of the ordinary."

****If anything about this situation can be considered ordinary,**** remarked Iolaus.

"That's one of the reasons Dumbledore is sending us," Sirius told him. His godfather perched on the arm of Remus' chair. "We think Voldemort is assembling a cabal of Old Ones there, possibly for a strike against the Ministry."

"Would the Old Ones, the ancient vampires, get involved in this?" asked Hermione. She shifted in her seat to look at them better. "From what I've read most vampires over a thousand don't pay much attention or interest in wizarding affairs."

****Is there anything Hermione hasn't read about?**** asked Alexander.

Harry hid his smile and replied smugly. *The only things Hermione hasn't ever bothered to read about are probably those sappy Romance novels my aunt was so fond of.*

"Perhaps we should send Snape to find out?" suggested Ginny jokingly. "After all, the man's practically a vampire anyhow. All he needs is to start drinking blood and he'll fit right in."

Sirius laughed. "I've been saying that since the day I first met that slimy git!"

Remus chuckled. "Actually you said something to that effect within about three minutes of coming

face-to-face with him on the Hogwarts Express."

"He hasn't ever done anything to change my opinion either," agreed Sirius happily.

Harry meanwhile was deep in thought and missed most of the byplay, thinking about what Sirius had said about a possible cabal of Old Ones. Vampires, especially truly ancient ones, were capable of powerful magic that could prove dangerous even to the Order of the Phoenix.

~You okay?~ asked Ginny, who had noticed his distraction.

Fine, he told her, before asking, "Hermione? Have you had any luck in the library yet? Ginny and I've been going through most of the headmaster's private library, but we haven't had much luck finding what we need."

"Nothing, I'm afraid," admitted Hermione, shaking her head.

"Finding what?" asked Sirius.

Ginny answered, "We've been looking for documented information about Hogwarts' protective wards as well as the layout of the general magic surrounding the school."

"We might have to make some modifications," Harry told her, using his hands to hold her hips in place and prevent too much squirming against his lap. "It would be a good idea to include some sort of... I don't know... Barrier Spell to prevent any vampires to enter the school or the grounds."

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"Something else to worry about," muttered Ginny, sinking her head back against his chest.

"Wonderful."

Harry noticed that Remus had narrowed his eyes and was looking thoughtful. He had obviously realized that neither Harry nor Ginny had mentioned the reason as to why they wanted information about the wards surrounding Hogwarts. His curiosity was obviously piqued and he was obviously about to ask when suddenly the door to the office swung open.

"Hey, Potter, what's keeping you down here?" asked Blaise Zabini as she sashayed her way into the room. She had most of her attention directed at Harry as she entered, but her voice trailed off as she noticed the visitors Harry was entertaining. "Our budding masters of bawdy sea shanties are finished now, all one hundred and forty verses, so there's no reason for... you... to... hide..."

He had to smile, even if he was slightly concerned about what had just happened. Blaise was now frozen just inside the office, her mouth hanging slightly open and her sparkling blue eyes wide as could be. Hermione was sitting stiffly in her chair, watching the Slytherin girl in obvious alarm and was shooting worried glances towards Remus and Sirius. Ginny, still resting on Harry's lap, was holding her breath in anticipation and he could feel the sudden tension in her muscles where he held her.

The two adults, for their part, were frozen in place in much the same manner as Blaise. Remus was sitting on the very edge of his seat and was moving scarcely a muscle. His face had likewise frozen in a blank mask. Sirius, the more excitable of the two, had such an expression of dismay and apprehension, not including the complete drainage of all the blood in his face, that Harry wondered if his wasn't having an attack of some sort.

~Harry?~ he heard Ginny ask him, *~what are we going to do?~*

I think maybe I should introduce her to Sirius, he replied seriously. *She already knows Remus.*

Ginny twisted her head to look at him. Her eyes were wide. *~You have got to be joking! She's seen Sirius, she knows he's here at Hogwarts. Once loud scream and she'll have a dozen Aurors running down here!~*

Harry reached up and stroked her cheek. *Don't worry, Gin. I trust her.*

~She's a Slytherin~ she cautioned him.

I know, he admitted, looking passed her to where Blaise and Sirius were staring silently at each other. She persisted, *~Why? Why d'you trust her with something like this.~*

Harry sighed softly before explaining, *Remember during the Triwizard Tournament? After my name was spat out by the Goblet of Fire? All those badges Malfoy was handing out?*

~Potter Stinks~ She nodded fractionally.

Blaise was the only Slytherin in the school who never bought or wore one, Harry told Ginny thinking back to those harsh days when it had seemed that almost everyone was against him, even Ron. *She never supported me openly, but it meant a lot to me that she did that. Besides, the cat, or rather the dog, is out of the bag. What would you suggest we do if we can't trust her? Obliviate her memory of walking in on us?*

~That's probably not a bad idea~ she muttered silently. After a moment she sighed and shook her head just enough to let him know her decision as she leaned back against his chest. *~Well, at least now we have an ally in Slytherin that's not Snape.~*

Harry chuckled, returning his attention to the still frozen forms of Hermione, Remus, Sirius and Blaise. He waved a hand from Blaise to Sirius and back, finally breaking the long silence. "Sirius, this is Blaise Zabini," he introduced with a bemused smile, "Blaise, this is my godfather, Sirius Black."

"Sirius Black?" asked Blaise weakly.

"Yes."

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"Sirius Black, as in the escaped prisoner of Azkaban?" she asked, looking at Sirius with more than a little concern. "The convicted murderer and supporter of the Dark Lord? That Sirius Black?"

Harry nodded. "That's right."

"Oh. Y'know," Blaise finally tore her wide-eyed gaze away from Sirius and towards Harry, "a few years ago I would have started screaming by now."

"That's what I like about you, Blaise," he admitted with a smile, "you're very level-headed."

Blaise returned his smile and then strode over to where Sirius was sitting perched on the armrest of Remus' chair. She came to a stop just in front of him and looked him over in a manner that reminded Harry of his Aunt Petunia sizing up a side of beef at the butcher's.

"So you're the infamous Sirius Black?" she asked coyly. At Sirius' silent nod, she reached out a hand and seductively traced the line of his jaw with a manicured finger. She grinned impishly at Sirius' dumbfounded expression and told him, "You're cuter than I thought you'd be."

Harry tried his hardest not to laugh as Sirius all but fell from his seat. He couldn't hold back a short cough of amusement as Blaise turned away from the two men and spoke to him again. She shook her head in what could only have been wonder. "You certainly do keep... interesting company, Potter. You'll have tell me about it one day."

He shrugged and gave a noncommittal nod. "One day."

Blaise's eyes were twinkling merrily as she walked to the door and pulled it open again. She stood in the doorway and looked back at Harry. "I'll hold you to that. See you up at the feast." Just before she turned to leave she glanced at Hermione and then at Ginny, who was still happily sitting on Harry's lap. She nodded amiably to them, "Granger, Weasley."

Turning on a heel, the centrefold of Slytherin house, stepped out of the office. She left behind one highly amused Harry Potter; two bemused, if slightly concerned young ladies; one somewhat worried, but otherwise willing to trust Harry's judgement, werewolf; and lastly one escaped convict that was in the process of having a mild stroke.

Offhand it was quite an exit.

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12. Of Bread and Circuses

The sun shone brightly in the crystal sky of late autumn, bathing the Quidditch pitch in its light if not its warmth. A few scarce and wispy clouds were dotted above, occasionally casting their shadows over the stands. Spectators were slowly beginning to arrive in anticipation of the first Quidditch match of the season, traditionally between Gryffindor and Slytherin.

"Bri' oot," observed Moira Mackay, when the Gryffindor team were making their way to the changing room to get ready for the match.

"Aye," agreed Seamus, whose Irish accent became more pronounced whenever he was in Moira's presence for too long. Nobody was quite sure why this was so, but the general consensus among the Gryffindors was that the poor boy was hopelessly smitten with the younger girl.

Ginny, who had the special broom Harry had made for her slung over her shoulder as they walked, shared a look with Hermione. Since the rather disturbing news that her parents wanted to withdraw her from Hogwarts, Hermione hardly ever left Ginny and Harry's company. Fortunately, from Ginny's standpoint, she had not shared their bed since that first night, when she received the letter declaring her parents' intentions.

Hermione, grinning slightly, leaned close and whispered in Ginny's ear, "I hear Dean's started a betting pool on when the two of them will be getting married."

"Well that's a coincidence," commented an unexpected voice.

Every one of the students turned to see Professors Gregory and Hilary Proteus approaching them. The pair were a favourite of most of the students and had succeeded in making Defence Against the Dark Arts one of the most popular classes.

****I'm not sure I believe in coincidences,**** noted Alexander, ****especially where those two are concerned.****

At the moment Gregory was wearing such a completely red outfit that one almost expected him to be trying for a position on the Gryffindor team. Every article of clothing he was wearing was some shade of red, all as vibrant and eye-catching as a Muggle fire hydrant. Hilary, on the other hand, was dressing in more demure tones of midnight blue and a dark tan, but with a red and gold Gryffindor scarf wrapped around her neck.

"I've made a bet of fifty Galleons with Professor Snape concerning the outcome of the match,"

admitted Gregory, coming up to the team and their friends with a broad, almost smug, grin on his chiselled features.

"D'you think that was wise, sir?" asked Hermione, who Ginny knew had never approved of any form of gambling.

"On reflection... perhaps not," admitted Gregory, but with a mischievous sparking in his sea-green eyes. His grin grew wider and he said, "A hundred Galleons would have been a *much* better bet." Standing beside him Hilary smirked knowingly. "Of course when you already know the outcome of the match..."

Gregory looked at her and obviously tried to look innocent. "That would be cheating, love."

"Never stopped you before."

****These two are very... odd,**** commented Sun Tzu, as Ginny and the other students watched the byplay between husband and wife. They were still walking and had almost reached the section of the stands where the team would be splitting away to the changing rooms while those who would simply be watching the match would climb up into the stands.

No kidding, Ginny agreed.

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~*Actually*~ Harry mentioned, swinging his Firebolt off his shoulder as they arrived outside the changing room, ~*I've thought they were both completely nuts that first night when they arrived after the Sorting.*~

"Y'know, if you persist in flirting with me like this," Gregory was telling Hilary, with a glance at the

teenagers next to them, "the students are going to think we're... odd."

Hilary waved a hand dismissively. "Greg, they've thought we were completely nuts ever since we arrived after the Sorting."

Ginny looked nervously at Harry, wondering not for the first time if their Defence professors weren't telepathic or something similar. Even the often blasé members of the Order had noticed these almost too coincidental instances, a fact Isis commented on. ****There's something about these Proteuses that makes me question if they are perhaps more dangerous than our initial assessment led us to believe.****

****I 'ave ze same feeling myself,**** agreed Joan.

****Perhaps they are simply eccentric,**** Merlin suggested, but his tone did not carry much conviction.

Harry chuckled and replied, *~Trust me, there's nothing simple about those two.~*

No argument from me, Ginny agreed. A sudden tension rising from her team-mates, who were oblivious to the silent conversation she and Harry were part of, alerted Ginny to the presence of two people walking towards their direction from the Slytherin portion of the stands. She glanced at Harry uncertainly and whispered, "D'you think she's Slytherin's new Seeker?"

"Could be, but I doubt it," he whispered back as the two girls approached. "She was okay on a broom during our flying lessons, but not good enough to play in a serious match."

The two girls, both Slytherins, came to a halt just outside the Gryffindor changing room. The assembled Gryffindors and two teachers waited and watched silently as the taller of the two went up to Harry with an air of practised nonchalance.

Harry inclined his head cordially. "Zabini."

"Potter," Blaise replied, running a hand through her short blonde hair, a devilish smile sparkling in her bright blue eyes. She was, surprisingly, not wearing anything in the green and silver of Slytherin.

Ginny tried to restrain the sudden nervous tension she felt in the Slytherin girl's presence. Neither she nor Harry or Hermione had spoken to Blaise in more than a passing manner since Halloween, when the blonde had walked in on their meeting with Remus and Sirius. While Harry seemed perfectly willing to trust her to keep quiet about Sirius' presence at the school, Ginny was on edge about the matter. Still, she had to admit, Blaise yet to confront the trio with any demands for an explanation. Harry turned his attention to the diminutive young girl that was standing nervously next to Blaise, dressing in her school robes and bearing a Slytherin scarf and rosette. Ginny recognised her as one of the first-years, though she could not place a name to the face. With a wolfish grin Harry asked, "Who do we have here... lunch?"

The girl, who barely reached Harry's chest, swallowed and took a backward step, one tiny hand reaching out to grasp of Blaise. "Eep."

"Her name is Amber Fargo," Blaise told Harry sternly, glaring at him in a severe and disapproving manner that was not unlike something Professor McGonagall might produce. She slid her arm around the eleven-year-old's shoulders and continued, "Her parents and mine are friends. We live in the same town, so we've known each other practically forever. I promised to look after her while she's getting familiar with the school."

"Pleased to meet you, Amber," Harry told her, offering her his hand. When she took it and gave a timid shake, he leaned close and whispered conspiratorially, "I deny everything Blaise has told you about me."

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Blaise poked Harry in the ribs and wagged a finger at him. "Be polite, Potter. Otherwise I might be tempted to make up for all those years Jordon put the Slytherin team down during his commentating."

This is a surprise, thought Ginny.

~No kidding~ replied Harry. He looked at Blaise in surprise. "You're the new commentator?"

She nodded, shrugging slightly. "Professor Snape suggested me for the role. McGonagall agreed, providing I don't try to outdo my predecessor. I don't know if I will - I'm not really one to make a scene."

Gregory, who was leaning against the wall with his arms around Hilary's waist, chuckled and said, "That's what I like about you, Ms Zabini; you're very level-headed."

****He's doing it again.****

~Yeah~ agreed Harry thoughtfully, *~I said the exact same thing when Blaise walked in on us during Halloween.~*

D'you think they might be illegal Animagi? asked Ginny. *Like Rita Skeeter is a beetle?*

****Anything is possible,**** admitted Merlin, ****though with those two I think there's nothing so simple about their secrets.****

Hermione was fiddling with the stylish pair of sunglasses Harry had handed to her at breakfast that morning, asking her to "test drive" them for him. This was the first she had heard about it, but apparently he had been working for the past few months of integrating the features found in a pair of wizarding Omniculars into the much smaller and less clumsy sunglasses. He had explained that he was planning on presenting them (he had another two test models) to the twins, Fred and George, for Christmas.

It was, Hermione thought, an idea that would doubtless bring possibly more income to the young entrepreneurs' business than their jokes, pranks and other novelties. The convenience of these new Omnitacles, as Harry had temporarily dubbed them --until the twins came up with something that sounded better-- was that they left your hands free.

Harry had completely replaced the many switches, knobs and dials that covered a standard pair of

Omnioculars with what was basically a modified Heads Up Display. He had borrowed the idea from Muggle jet fighters which Harry had apparently seen when Dudley had once watched an air show on the television. The only control adorning the sunglasses was a single brass button that Harry had tastefully blended into the frames. This was the toggle to activate the Omnitacles, which was done by tapping the button three times in quick succession.

The seemingly holographic display was iconographic in nature and, using cues from the wearer's eyes, operated not unlike the desktop of a Muggle computer. You simply had to look at the icon for half a second or so, while it seemed to hover in the air a couple of feet in front of you, and the function it controlled would be activated.

Now if only he had written a user's manual, she thought, dropping into one of the few remaining empty seats in the Gryffindor section of the crowd.

"Mind if I join you, Hermione?"

Slightly startled by the unexpected voice, Hermione looked up to see Professor Hilary Proteus standing in front of her. "Of course not, Professor," she said.

Hilary sat in the seat next to her. "We're not in class right now, so call me Hilary, okay?"

"Um, okay," Hermione agreed nervously, not at all comfortable being on such familiar terms with one of her teachers.

"Have you seen where Gregory has got to?" asked Hilary, looking around in search for her husband.

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"Isn't that him?" Hermione asked, pointing him out. "Over there by the house-elves? It's kind of hard to miss all that red."

Hilary looked to where Hermione was indicating and nodded. "Ah, yes. That's him. Don't know what he's talking to Dobby and the others for though. Probably trying to arrange a treat for the Gryffindor team when they win."

Hermione pushed the sunglasses up into her hair and looked at the professor. "You seem awfully sure that Gryffindor are going to win."

"Of course they are," said Hilary smiling. "They have the best Seeker Hogwarts has seen in years playing for them, not to mention a top notch trio of Chasers, a rock solid Keeper and a pair of Beaters that could intimidate a squad of Aurors. How could they possibly lose? Besides, they're Gryffindors."

"Were you and, um, G-Gregory in Gryffindor?" she asked, stumbling over the use of the absent man's give name rather than his title.

Hilary sank back in her seat. "Yes. In fact, it's something of a tradition in both our families to be sorted into Gryffindor."

Hermione nodded, glancing to where Gregory was still discussing something with the three dozen house-elves that had come to the match to support Gryffindor. "Is that why Prof- er, Gregory is dressed all in red?"

"No."

It was impossible to miss the note of sadness that laced the single word Hilary had answered with.

Hermione turned back to her and saw that her companion was staring off into space with a forlorn expression. She wondered what it was that brought about such a change to the older woman's normally cheerful demeanour.

Hilary, shaking off her distraction, seemed to notice Hermione's interest and sighed. "It was a long time ago, when we were both still in school."

She didn't really want to pry, but Hermione was unable to resist asking, "What happened?"

"The details are... disturbing to say the least," admitted Hilary. She turned her bright hazel eyes to Hermione and smiled tremulously. "Suffice to say Gregory was badly traumatised by what happened.

It took years for him to get over it. Many years."

"And that's why he wearing so much red for this match?" Hermione asked in confusion.

Hilary shook her head sadly. "No. He's wearing the red to remind himself that he managed to *overcome* what happened. The match is just a convenient excuse. If you look carefully you'll see that he makes a point of wearing at least a little bit of red everyday. Whether it's his shirt or the lining of his cloak or even his socks, he always has on something that's red."

By now Hermione was totally confused and this must have shown on her face as Hilary decided to explain a bit more. "For nearly five years after the... incident, Gregory had an almost mortal terror of the colour red. They had to move him out of Gryffindor tower because of it; he couldn't even bring himself to climb into the common room because of it."

"But he obviously got over it," observed Hermione, glancing to where the house-elves were standing, but Gregory was no longer there.

"It took years, but eventually he did," Hilary confirmed. A contented smile graced her lips as she seemed to be thinking back. "It was the day of our wedding, actually. He damn near gave everyone a heart attack when he turned up wearing a red cloak."

"It must have been very difficult," Hermione mused, unconsciously rubbing her impaired right arm with her left hand.

Hilary nodded and said, "It was, but I got through it."

"How?" asked Hermione.

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"I kept telling myself that it could have been worse," admitted Hilary.

Hermione chuckled and half-joked, "Yeah, you could've had red hair, like Ginny."

"Yeah."

For a moment Hermione wondered at the strange tone Hilary had used, but the thought did not fully

form as Hilary asked, "And you? Have you heard anything from your parents yet?"

Hermione swallowed. "You know?"

"All the professors do," admitted Hilary.

"I got a letter from them this morning," Hermione told her. She bowed her head and wrung her hands in her lap before continuing, "They say they've already made arrangements for a tutor to help me catch up the things I need to go to a Muggle school. They're talking about enrolling me in the Midsomer Causton Academy for Girls."

"Don't worry," Hilary assured her, patting her on the shoulder. "Everything will work out in the end, you'll see. It's just a matter of time."

Hermione looked up, tears brimming in her eyes. "Oh Merlin, I hope so. I don't want to leave here. Hogwarts, magic, it's my life now. I can't give it up, especially now."

Hilary reached out and, cupping Hermione's chin, turned her head to one side. "We're not going to give up on you, Hermione. Look."

"What? Oh!"

There, a short way around the stands in the section reserved for non-students, was a grouping of one particular red-haired family. Mrs Weasley was in the middle, bracketed on either side by the twins, with Charlie Weasley bringing up the rear. They had obviously come to the match, both to watch Ginny play for the first time (not as a reserve) and then doubtless would visit Ron in the Hospital Wing.

Fred and George, it seemed, had brought some of their wares to sell during the match in an attempt at promoting their joke shop that they planned on opening next year. Molly, naturally, had found out and was dragging them along by their ears while berating them in that sabre-toothed tiger manner she was famous for. Charlie was grinning broadly at their discomfort and protesting wails that Hermione could just make out over the noise of the crowd.

"Go on," Hilary told her, giving her a nudge, "I'm sure I can survive here without you. Besides, I have to find that wayward husband of mine."

Hermione smiled her thanks and jumped up from her seat. She pulled the sunglasses down and slid them back onto her nose as she hurriedly started to make her way towards the Weasleys. She hoped she would get to them before the match started.

"Oh, and don't let Fred and George find out about the Omnitacles!" she heard Hilary call after.

It took a moment to sink in. How the devil could the Defence professor know about Harry's experiment with the sunglasses? He had only told Hermione that morning and the only other person who knew was Ginny. Hermione stopped and turned back to stare at Hilary, but found that the older witch had vanished from sight, no doubt gone looking for Gregory.

"And first onto the field-" Blaise Zabini's magically amplified voice announced, "-is the Gryffindor team, comprising of Ryder, Finnigan, MacKay, Harriet and Ginny Weasley, all of which played their first match last year as a reserve team against Slytherin. New to the squad is Jefferson Hope, who is filling in for injured Chaser Ron Weasley. They are led onto the field by their captain and star Seeker, Harry Potter!"

"Oh, bluddie Hades!"

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Harry looked at Moira, who had a hand over her eyes and was shaking her head. He glanced across the field at the approaching Slytherin team. He recognised most of the players, with the exception of the new Seeker, who looked to be in only his second year. He looked to Seamus, who was standing next to Moira, but the other Beater seemed just as puzzled by the young girl's outburst.

"What is it? D'you recognise him?" he asked.

"Aye, he's m' cousin Angus," Moira sighed in resignation.

Ginny, who was eyeing the short and skinny boy, asked, "Is he any good?"

Moira shook her head, "Tha's li' askin' iffina stuin anvil cin fly."

Er...

I think she was being sarcastic.

With that accent it's sometimes hard to tell.

"Captains, shake hands," ordered Madam Hooch, who was refereeing the match. Harry, not really wanting to, stepped forward to unenthusiastically shake hands. After the abrupt disappearance of Draco Malfoy, the Slytherins had been forced to elect a new captain to replace him. Their choice of the rather bulldoggish Millicent Bulstrode was not unexpected, as she was the only player left on the team, since Malfoy was gone and the other five had finished school the previous year.

Madam Hooch nodded and, with a deft kick to its side, opened the trunk holding the Quidditch balls. Quickly she released the Snitch, followed by the two Bludgers, before taking the Quaffle in her hands and saying, "Players, mount your brooms. On my whistle. Three, two, one!"

Harry, as was his custom, launched himself into the air. Within moments he was soaring high above the pitch and the other players. Nudging lightly on his Firebolt's handle he began to circle the stadium, already searching for the Snitch. As he passed by the Gryffindor section, he could hear the piercing cries of the house-elves, who had emerged from the kitchens for the morning in support of his team.

"Harry Potter! Harry Potter! Harry Potter! Harry Potter!!"

Grinning and waving to Dobby and his compatriots as he glided past, Harry turned his attention back to the game. Since none of the Slytherins aside from Bulstrode had any experience, it was not much of a surprise to see that Gryffindor had possession of the Quaffle and seemed to be in optimum position to score the first goal of the game and season.

Watching as his Chasers swooped towards the Slytherin goals, Harry tuned his ears to listen to Blaise's commentary of events.

"And Weasley passes to Harriet, who manages to duck under Isaacs by blinding him with the glare off his bald head."

"Miss Zabini!"

Harry looked to the announcer's box where Blaise was sitting between Amber and Professor McGonagall, who was looking somewhat martyred. Apparently the Deputy Headmistress' hopes that Blaise would prove less biased than Lee Jordan had just been dashed.

"Sorry, Professor," Blaise continued, sounding completely unapologetic. She looked up and saw Harry watching her and cheekily stuck out her tongue before returning to the game. "Harriet swerves past Stephenides and makes an underhand pass to Weasley, riding the broomstick Potter presented her with last Christmas. One has to wonder if perhaps she hasn't ridden any of her captain's other broomsticks-"

"MISS ZABINI!!!"

Unable to decide whether to blush or laugh at Blaise's commenting, Harry resumed his search for the Snitch. *So much for not being one to make a scene*, he thought wryly, noticing that Moira's cousin Angus was trailing close on his heels, not unlike Malfoy used to.

****And you thought she was level-headed.****

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She was!

"Weasley drops the Quaffle to Hope, the newcomer to the team, he shoots - wonderful save by Slytherin Keeper Farrow. The Quaffle is deflected straight to - NO! Weasley has intercepted the ball before it reaches Chaser Isaacs. She swings past Farrow, feints to the right and scores the first goal of the match through the left hoop. Farrow - you're as blind as that bat Trelawney!"

"Zabini," McGonagall all but growled, making a grab for the microphone.

Blaise, resisting the professor's attempts, continued, "Sorry, Professor. Ten points to Gryffindor, scored by Ginny Weasley!"

"Gingy Wheezy! Gingy Wheezy! Gingy Wheezy! Gingy Wheezy!!!"

Apparently Dobby was leading the house-elves in their cheering. For a moment, hearing their words, Harry thought back to the second task of the Triwizard Tournament. He clearly remembered every detail, especially being woken up by Dobby, who had so frantically and determinedly sent Harry down to the lake to save his Wheezy, Ron.

Harry found himself looking over the stadium, towards the castle and the Hospital Wing, where Ron lay in his coma. He blinked in surprise when suddenly Moira bobbed up in front of him, swinging her Beater's club with relish. The Bludger, which had been aimed straight for Harry, made a loud crunch as it smashed into the opposing Slytherin Beater's face, breaking his nose.

"Tae tha' yeh bluddie Sassenach!!!" Moira crowed, grinning wickedly. She spun round on her broom and smiled at Harry. "Careful Skipper, we cannae hae ye gettin' hurt noo, can we?"

"Thanks, Moira," Harry acknowledged, shaking himself out of his thoughts and back to the game. As Moira dived back down into the midst of the other players, club raised over her head, Harry began searching for the elusive Snitch.

He passed by the Gryffindor goalposts and exchanged a few words with their Keeper, Carmen, when Gareth slipped past the Farrow to score again.

"Twenty - zero to Gryffindor," declared Blaise, glaring angrily at the Slytherin Keeper, who was not looking pleased with himself. "Get your bloody head out of the clouds, you dope!"

The match continued in a similar manner for the next half an hour. Despite the fact that six of their players were playing for the first time, the Slytherins were able to put up a reasonable display. Even so, they were clearly not in the same class as the Gryffindor team.

Of the Chasers Gareth Harriet, son of the Jamaican Ministry's Ambassador, was a very adroit flyer on his Nimbus 2000. Ginny, who was flying the cherry wood broom Harry had crafted for her last year, was little more than a red and gold blur as she streaked to and fro across the pitch. Only Jefferson Hope, one of the fifth-year Prefects, was unsure of himself. Understandable considering he was stepping in for Ron, but the past few months of practise had made certain that he was up to scratch. Between the three of them they had possession of the Quaffle more than three-quarters of the time, aided and abetted by the lunatic pair of Moira and Seamus. The two Beaters were a perfect team that rivalled their mentors, the Weasley twins. Moira in particular seemed especially bloodthirsty and often seemed on the verge of physically tackling her opponents.

****If she ever decides to paint her face blue, start running for the hills.****

I'm more worried about what she's going to do when Practical Fighting Techniques reopens after the Christmas holidays.

****Oh, that's a delightful idea.****

****We're doomed.****

Harry noticed too that as the game progressed Blaise's comments about the Gryffindor team became less insulting and more professional, while her observations of the Slytherin's were becoming as scathing as anything Snape ever managed to produce during Potions.

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"Weasley passes to Hope in a perfect example of the Ansorg Assault. Hope shoots at the goals and scores his first points of the match. That makes the score seventy - thirty to Gryffindor," Blaise intoned, gazing up and imploring the heavens as she did. With a disappointed sounding sigh she angrily waved a fist at one of the Slytherin Beaters and yelled, "That was pathetic!"

****I like that girl,**** decided Beowulf. ****She's almost as entertaining as the previous commentator.****

At least she's on our side, Harry agreed. I think.

Professor McGonagall had apparently given up trying to censor Blaise and appeared to have decided to simply sit back and enjoy the game. Harry found it amazing that Blaise had managed to succeed in a single game what Lee Jordan had failed to accomplish in several years. Of course, McGonagall had probably been greatly worn down by Lee's efforts.

Then he saw it.

It was quite by accident really. The Snitch was hovering only a scant few metres above the ground, almost directly below Harry. The only reason he had spotted it was because he had hung his head down to shake it over Blaise's antics. He glanced up and saw that Angus, the other Seeker, had apparently seen the tiny golden ball as well and was already diving towards it at breakneck speed.

"Seamus!" Harry called, catching the attention of his nearest Beater. "Their Seeker! Now!"

Seamus twisted on his broom and managed to get a shot in as a Bludger flew past him. His aim was as true as it always was, and the black ball careened directly at Angus. The diminutive second-year looked up from his dive just in time to see the Bludger coming toward him. He swerved to one side just before impact, aborting his pursuit, but was too late to pull out of his dive properly and crashed into the ground with a horrible crack.

Harry, in the meanwhile, had tilted his Firebolt vertically and was dropping to the ground in what looked like a passable Wronski Feint. He was descending almost straight down and was barely able to twist out of his fall at the last instant. His back brushed against the short grass of the pitch as he flew upside-down for a few seconds before righting himself, the Snitch held high above his head in victory!

"And Potter gets the Snitch! Gryffindor win! Two hundred and twenty to thirty!" announced Blaise.

Harry saw her shaking her head dispiritedly as she handed the microphone over to McGonagall.

Slowing to a halt, Harry quickly dismounted as four scarlet streaks bore down on him. His feet had barely touched the ground when Ginny crashed into him, hugging him fiercely before pulling him into a kiss. Gareth, Jefferson and Carmen waited for them to come up for air before sweeping them both into a crushing embrace.

Looking over Carmen's shoulder Harry saw that Moira had descended, with Seamus, to where the unhappy-looking Slytherin team were gathered around her cousin. One of the Chasers was pulling on the poor boy's leg and apparently he was not enjoying the attention. From the direction of the changing rooms Harry could see Madam Pomfrey hurrying towards them.

"OWWW! Watch it, ye nitwit! Tha' hurts!" Angus yelled, swinging at the Chaser responsible.

"I think we better get Madam Pomfrey," observed the Chaser, "this looks serious."

Angus glared at the other boy and bellowed, "O' course tis serious!"

Moira stood over him, Seamus at her sides, and asked, "D'ye think tis bruiken?"

"O' course tis bruiken ye dozy Welshgirl!"

Moira, who was the personification of Scotland, naturally took that badly. It was fortunate for Angus that Madam Pomfrey arrived at that moment, a conjured stretcher trailing behind her. As the crowds of Gryffindors and other spectators ran onto the pitch, Harry could hear Angus' continued rebukes towards his teammates.

"Ah never shouldae let ye maniacs talk m' intae this!"

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"Harry!" squealed Hermione, running up to him and hugging him. She almost succeeded in spinning him around before kissing him on the cheek and turning to crush Ginny in her grasp. "You won!"

"Ah knew somethin' was goin' tae happen. Ah knew it!"

A pair of hands clapped Harry firmly on the back and he quickly found himself having his arms nearly shaken off by Fred and George. Each of the twins had grabbed a hand and were making a grand display of congratulating him on Gryffindor's first win without them, though they did take full credit for anything and everything Moira and Seamus had accomplished.

"Ah cannae believe Ah let ye buffoons talk m' intae thi'!"

Charlie, who was more sedate, came up and managed to pry his younger brothers off Harry. The dragon tamer grinned at Harry and shook his hand. "Congratulations," he said, "I'd heard you were a damn fine Seeker, but this is the first time I've really had a chance to watch you play.

"Ah'm never makin' tha' mistake again, nae siree!"

"Charlie! Watch your language!" chided Molly Weasley, pushing her way through the celebrating Gryffindors and looking a little out of breath.

"From now awn, Ah'm Hogsmeade-bound durin' matches!"

Everyone turned as Angus' voice reached them far more clearly than before. Madam Pomfrey had managed to lift him onto the stretcher and was taking him to the Hospital Wing. Moira and Seamus were following them as everyone turned to watch.

"Prob'ly wheelchair bound as wuil!" Angus was saying, waving his arms about in exaggerated movements as they passed. He spotted the assembled crowd looking at him, especially the conspicuous red-haired Weasleys, and immediately snarled, "Wha' are ye gawkin' at ye bloody carrotheads?"

Harry had to stifle his laughter at Molly's put-off expression. The Weasley matriarch stared after the young boy as he was carried off, still ranting at what sounded very much like the top of his lungs.

"Haven't ye ever seen a Scotsman wi' a broken leg befuir?"

Moira, who had joined the rest of the team, bemoaned, "Tha's why I dinnae care fuir his coompany."

"We must make allowances, I suppose," Molly said eventually as the spectacle receded and the victory celebrations continued. "It's obvious he's suffering."

"Bollocks!" exclaimed Fred indignantly. He almost quailed under the fierce glare of his mother, but persisted in saying, "It's true! He's enjoying every minute of it! Like Percy does when he's sick."

Harry wrapped one arm around Ginny's waist and the other around Hermione's and proceeded to lead his friends and family off the pitch, a broad smile on his face.

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13. Developments

Harry Potter was hot. Very hot indeed. Orange and yellow flames were dancing up his robes, which he had just set alight while pacing too close to his office's fire. This was the cue for panicked slapping of the fire and a volley of choice swearwords that could curdle fresh milk. Finally putting the minor blaze out, he removed the charred garment and mournfully observed, "Well, that's the end of this robe."

"That's what happens when you don't look where you're pacing," Ginny laughed.

"Oh, put a sock in it," he told her, waving his hand over the scorched robe and instantly repairing the fire damage.

One of Ginny's elegant auburn eyebrows curved upwards. Sitting at his desk, which was almost lost under mounds of parchment and piles of books, Ginny set the manuscript she was reading down and looked at him. "My, you're in a bit of a snit today."

Harry sighed and tossed his robes over the back of a nearby chair. "Sorry, Gin. It's just that I'm getting a little frustrated with this. It's nearly three months and we've covered so little ground. At this rate we'll never be ready to disperse the Well when the time comes."

"We knew this wouldn't be fast and easy, Harry," she told him. Harry sank into the chair opposite her, not looking very happy. Ginny must have read his expression better than he thought, since she stood and came around the desk to stand by him. She knelt down next to him and took his hands in both of hers.

~There's more to it than just our lack of progress~ she ventured silently. Harry looked into her bright brown eyes and reluctantly nodded confirmation of her suspicion. When he didn't say anything, she quietly prompted, "What is it?"

Sighing deeply he answered, "Term's ending in a week. Christmas holidays."

Ginny immediately understood. "Hermione."

Harry dropped his face into his hands and ran them through his hair, bringing them up slamming them against the armrests of his chair. His frustration was palpable, as was his exhaustion. It had been nearly three months since he and Ginny had learned that Hermione's parents planned to withdraw her from Hogwarts. At the end of the term, the beginning of the holidays, she would be returning home and possibly not returning.

"Dammit!" he swore, hitting his thigh with a fist. "I've tried everything and nothing works! I've sent letters, over a dozen, trying to explain things to them. They're not even bothering to reply any more! They think I'm just some *child*."

"You *are* just a child, Harry," Ginny gently interrupted. "We all are."

"No, we're not!" he pressed. "I'm not a *child*! I'm Hermione's *friend*! And Hermione's not a child either. She's a witch, the best damn witch I've ever known."

Ginny smiled playfully. "Including me?"

He did not rise to the tease, preferring to glower instead. "Don't try and twist my words, Gin. You know what I mean."

"I know," she admitted. "It's just that you need to calm down."

He is calm. More or less.

Quite true. You can tell by the fact that he's not floating.

Oh, shut up you lot, he growled.

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"Her parents are almost as obstinate as she is," Harry said, rubbing the bridge of his nose. "They refuse to believe that removing Hermione from Hogwarts will cause her greater injury than if she were to stay. I admit I don't know much about her life outside of school, I've never been to her home, but I don't think she has many friends. If any. The people she's attached to in life are here, at Hogwarts, and if she leaves she will be all alone."

Ginny stood and, to Harry's amusement, began to pace. "Have you considered visiting them? We could Apparate to their home tonight - try convince them in person. We could take Hermione with us. She could argue her case to her folks and we could support her."

Before Harry could contemplate this idea, Hermione burst into the office. She had a large book in her grasp, supported mainly by her stronger left arm, and a rushed yet triumphant air about her. She didn't bother greeting either of them, instead she hurried over to the desk. With a clumsy sweep of her right arm she cleared one cluttered corner of the desktop, sending a dozen books and several tall stacks of parchment tumbling to the floor.

"Hey!" protested Harry, rising to his feet.

"Don't worry, this is worth it," Hermione said, thumping the book she was holding onto the cleared space. She turned and grinned at the two of them. "I think I've found it."

"What?" Ginny's strode over to the desk, from where she had halting in her pacing by the fireplace and looked at the book Hermione had brought in. Harry, somewhat more sedately joined the two witches by the desk.

Hermione was beaming in that triumphant way she had after finally unearthing whatever secrets she had been searching for. Nicolas Flamel. Polyjuice Potion. Summoning Charms. All those things she had sought out over the years to help in their adventures.

She always comes through in the end, he thought. Doesn't she?

~Of course she does~ replied Ginny. *~She's Hermione.~*

Together, with Hermione standing behind them, Harry and Ginny leaned over and looked at the book.

It was old, as most books in the Hogwarts library were, and seemed to have been the survivor of numerous fires, floods, wars and uncountable grubby hands. Its title was emblazoned on its tattered leather cover in letters of peeling copper (long since turned green).

Hogwarts' Grounds

A Magical Energies Study

by Calvin Hobbles

Harry grinned, knowing that this was it, and shared a victorious grin with Ginny. She too seemed to sense that they had finally made the breakthrough that they had been searching for. He gripped her hand in his and squeezed it tightly, paging through the book with his other hand.

It's here, he thought. It's all here. All of it. Everything we need.

~With this we can be done mapping the location by New Years~ agreed Ginny.

Releasing Ginny's hand and flipping the book closed, Harry turned and enveloped Hermione in a ribcrunching hug. She squealed with surprise, as well as delight, when he lifted her off her feet and began spinning her around in his arms.

"You did it, Hermione! You did it!"

"Indeed," interrupted a voice from the doorway. "Might I enquire as to what exactly Miss Granger has succeeded in doing?"

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Ginny turned away from the desk, slightly surprised that Dumbledore had managed to sneak up on them. He was standing just inside the door, his silver hair and beard glowing in the firelight. He was smiling in that mysterious, yet grandfatherly, manner which suited him so very well. He was holding a letter, written on what looked like Muggle paper, in one hand.

Harry answered his question. "She's found a book detailing the arrangements of the various wards protecting the castle. It's still too early to say for sure, we've only just glanced over the book, but it seems to have everything we need."

"Ah, yes," Dumbledore nodded. "I recall granting permission for you and her to search through the Restricted Section of the library. It is good to hear that your search has finally borne fruit."

"Took me long enough," Hermione muttered.

"Perhaps, but that delay may well work in our favour, might it not?" Dumbledore asked, looking to Harry and Ginny.

Ginny exchanged an apprehensive look with Harry and replied, "Unfortunately it doesn't create anything in the way of an advantage. The foci are still growing, so having the details of the castle's wards is only going to help us in that we'll be able to set them up immediately after they're completely formed."

Harry nodded and returned to his seat. "Other than that, the only advantage we have at the moment is that Malfoy doesn't know that we can potentially disperse the Well."

"Potentially?" repeated Dumbledore, not looking reassured by the word.

Ginny rounded the desk and settled on Harry's lap. His arms snaked around her waist and help her to him as he tried to explain. "Albus, would you believe it possible to start an avalanche with a single pebble? One tiny grain of sand, in the right place, at the right time..."

Dumbledore, finding a chair to sit in, nodded. "I would accept the concept as an axiom. The smallest of actions can have far reaching and life altering results. I have seen many examples of such during my life."

Knowing where Harry was going with his metaphor, Ginny asked, "Then would you believe it's possible for a single pebble to *stop* an avalanche?"

"It would not be easy," the venerable wizard admitted, but nodded his head. His bright blue eyes watched Ginny and Harry closely from over the tops of his spectacles. "You would have to place the pebble in the right place, at the right time. As you would need to do in order to start it."

"Then you see our problem," Harry said. "Draco Malfoy is now like an avalanche. With the power of the Well as his disposal, he is all but unstoppable. Anything that gets in his way will be crushed by sheer force. Stopping him will require performing the *exact* right action, in the *exact* right place and at the *exact* right time."

Ginny bobbed her head in agreement. "Dispersing the Well involves a great deal of chance. We have to lure Draco into the trap, catch him by surprise, or it will fail."

"That is why we have to be so careful during the design of it," Harry continued. "Everything has to be absolutely perfect. If one of the foci is out of position by even a fraction of an inch, well, Malfoy will be the *least* of our worries."

"What d'you mean?" asked Hermione, who had also found a seat.

"Imagine, if you can, a total, instantaneous magical course reversal," replied Harry.

Hermione paled slightly. "Isn't that what happened in the auditorium? At the start of term when Malfoy teleported out of the school?"

Ginny nodded. "Only a few million times more powerful. Basically everything within a five mile radius will be completely disassociated."

****That's putting it mildly.****

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****Shut up.****

"So what brings you down here, Albus?" asked Harry. "Besides checking on our progress?"

Dumbledore held up the sheet of paper in his hand. He waved it about and said, "I come bearing good news and... disturbing news."

Behind her Harry dropped his head onto her shoulder. Ginny felt much the same as he obviously did. There had been very little good news over the past few weeks and more often than not it was accompanied by bad news. Disturbing news was no doubt a new euphemism of Dumbledore's forewarning the coming of what was no doubt exceptionally bad news.

"Can we have the good news first?" asked Harry, voice slightly muffled.

"I was planning to explain in that order," agreed Dumbledore.

Harry lifted his head and squeezed his arms around Ginny's waist. She returned the action by squeezing his arms and leaning back against him. Very much to Ginny's surprise however, Dumbledore did not hand the sheet of Muggle-made paper to either her or Harry. Instead, he turned in his seat and offered it to Hermione.

With a puzzled expression Hermione reached out with her good arm and plucked the letter from Dumbledore's hand. She looked to Harry and Ginny before starting to read, but neither of them could offer anything more than an equally puzzled shrug.

What d'you think it is? Ginny asked, as Hermione unfolded the letter.

~Beats me~ replied Harry. *~Must have something to do with Hermione though.~*

Ginny felt a flutter of excitement. *You don't think...*

Her thought trailed off as Hermione began to read. "Dear Professor Dumbledore," she began. She cleared her throat and looked nervously at the waiting headmaster. Dumbledore gave a nod for her to continue and so she resumed, "We have, after careful deliberation, decided to comply with the recommendations made by yourself and your staff. Consequently we will grant permission for our daughter, Hermione, to remain at Hogwarts--"

Harry's office promptly exploded into a cacophony of noise as the three teenagers present began to cheer and whoop and scream and yell themselves hoarse. Dumbledore remained in his seat, his eyes twinkling merrily, as Harry and Ginny literally jumped over the desk and enveloped Hermione in an overjoyed embrace.

The trio were jumping around and making ecstatic cries for long minutes, not really paying much attention to what they were doing. They were far more concerned with simply expressing the utter sense of relief and exultation that had swept over them.

Finally, at Hermione's insistence, they settled down and finished reading the letter. Hermione resumed her place in the chair beside Dumbledore. Harry and Ginny stood behind her and read the letter over her shoulders. Ginny felt that her grin would split her face in two if it were to get any broader, which it was doing as they scrolled down the letter.

"I think you should pay particular attention," mentioned Dumbledore, "to the part that mentions the visit they were paid by Professor McGonagall and Professor Snape this Wednesday."

"Snape? Professor Snape talked my parents into letting me stay?" Hermione's disbelief could only be matched by Ginny's. Even Harry seemed dumbfounded and read that line of the letter several times, just to confirm what his eyes were seeing.

"I could kiss him," muttered Ginny, aware that if she did her brothers would no doubt completely disown her. "I don't care if he is a slimy git, I just might kiss him for this."

Dumbledore chuckled a bit and shook his head. "That would probably be a bad idea, Virginia," he told her. Then his expression turned serious as did his voice. "Especially as Severus did no such thing. Nor did Minerva for that matter."

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Ginny blinked. Harry blinked.

"What?" they chorused, Hermione echoing them a moment later.

Dumbledore slipped his half-moon spectacles from his crooked nose and began to polish them with a vibrantly orange handkerchief. The colour momentarily caused Ginny's mind to wander to Ron, who was still lying comatose in the Hospital Wing. Doubtless Harry and Hermione's thoughts also strayed to their friend, and in Hermione's case boyfriend, but Dumbledore appeared not to notice.

Returning his glasses to their place on his nose, he explained, "Miss Granger's parents inform me that they were visited by Professor McGonagall and Professor Snape in the early evening of this week Wednesday. Three days ago. I wrote to them and they place the time as being between six and nine o'clock that evening, during which their visitors were successful in convincing them that it would be best to allow their daughter to remain here, at Hogwarts."

"So what's the problem?" asked Ginny, a tad impatiently.

"There is a weekly staff meeting every Wednesday at that time, for the heads of the four houses,"

Dumbledore revealed. His brow furrowed as he stroked his silvery moustache with a finger. "Both Minerva and Severus were in attendance and could not possibly have been present at the Granger residence. They were with me the entire time."

"But, then who..." Hermione trailed off, obviously at a loss.

Dumbledore shook his head, "I'm afraid we do not know. I had Mundungus Fletcher and Arabella Figg stop by the house yesterday, but they could not detect any magic that might reveal the identities of the impostors."

Harry was gripping Ginny's shoulder firmly. "But why? I mean, why would anyone want to keep Hermione at Hogwarts? Besides us I mean?"

"That, I'm afraid, I do not know."

"Well, I for one am not going to look a gift horse in the mouth," announced Hermione, folding the letter and handing it back to Dumbledore. She was wearing the expression Ginny recognised as the one she normally wore when having staunchly made up her mind about something.

Ginny nodded in agreement. "Right. It may be a mystery, but I don't see that we should concern

ourselves unduly with it. After all, it couldn't have been Death Eaters or anyone that wants to hurt Hermione."

"How do you come to this conclusion, Virginia?" asked Dumbledore.

Harry answered for her, "If anybody was planning to abduct or attack Hermione, their best bet would be off Hogwarts grounds, Albus, you know that. Despite Malfoy's destruction of the PFT auditorium, this castle is still the safest place in the wizarding world."

Dumbledore nodded his agreement. "Perfectly sound, yes, but the question is, why?"

"We may never know," replied Hermione.

"You rang, Albus?"

Dumbledore looked up from the report he was reading. Remus and Sirius had finished the work he had assigned them in Paris and were now making their way to Dublin. Unfortunately their news was not heartening as they confirmed Dumbledore's fear that Voldemort was in the process of recruiting the vampire nation to his cause. He put this and other worries aside for the moment as this year's Defence Against the Dark Arts professors, Gregory and Hilary Proteus, stepped into his office.

"I presume you have heard of Miss Granger's good fortune?" he asked as the couple settled down opposite him.

"Of course we have," grinned Gregory, "you told about it less than an hour ago."

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Dumbledore could not help but chuckle at the young man's cheerful demeanour. He pushed the report he had been reading to one side and shifted comfortably in his plush chair. "Am I correct in assuming the two of you had something to do with it?"

Her hazel eyes were sparkling merrily as Hilary denied it, "Of course we didn't. It was Minerva and Snape."

Gregory laughed and draped an arm around his wife's shoulders. He widened his eyes in mock wonder and said, "The only way we could've been involved was, say... Polyjuice Potion?"

"Drinking a piece of Snape. Ugh, can you imagine the taste?" replied Hilary, grimacing at the thought.

"Don't have to."

"It's been three days."

Gregory shuddered theatrically, "All the grease in his hair made the aftertaste cling to me."

Sensing that he would not be receiving any outright confirmation of his suspicions, though their banter had already done so, Dumbledore decided to turn back to the reason he had summoned the two professors. "Very well. Perhaps we could move onto the reason I called you here?"

Picking up his wand Dumbledore summoned a case from one of the many shelves encircling the office. It was a wooden case topped with glass, similar to those used for display of precious artefacts, and about the size of a small Muggle suitcase. It drifted from its place alongside his Pensieve and came to rest on his desk, in front of the seated couple.

"Do you perchance recognise this?" he asked.

Gregory leaned forward and studied the artefact displayed inside the case. For an instant Dumbledore thought he saw a glimmer of recognition, but it was gone as quickly as it had formed. Gregory shrugged and said, "I'll admit it does look familiar."

Hilary, who had also looked into the case, rolled her eyes. "Of course it does," she said with a sigh, settling back into her chair. "After all, how many nine thousand year old prophecies predicting the death of the Boy-Who-Lived could there possibly be?"

"Thought it looked familiar," admitted Gregory, reaching out to hold one of Hilary's hands.

Dumbledore noticed that she gave him a gentle, reassuring, squeeze.

"Then it is an accurate translation?" he asked, lifting up a scroll of parchment that he had set aside earlier. It was the complete translation Fleur Delacour had made of the stone tablet sitting before them.

"From what I remember, yes," admitted Hilary, although neither she nor her husband made to take the translation from Dumbledore's proffered hand. She turned to Gregory and asked, "What do you think, lover?"

Gregory shifted uncomfortably for a few moments. He looked over the stone tablet again and, to Dumbledore's surprise, appeared to actually read the ancient script. He shrugged and said in a nonchalant voice, "Still very bad poetry."

Dumbledore frowned, not pleased by the indifferent manner in which the two professors were acting. And they were acting he knew, since the prophecy involved them to a great degree. He looked from one to the other and asked, "Is there no way to avoid its fulfilment?"

"It's a Sumerian prophecy," said Gregory, shaking his head. "You have as much chance of avoiding it as Snape has as chance of winning a popularity contest."

"I see the years have not dulled your dislike for Severus," observed Dumbledore, a small grin curling his lips.

Hilary groaned and looked imploringly up to the heavens, "If anything he's gotten worse."

Now Dumbledore had to chuckle, "Which no doubt explains why you so delight in tormenting him at every chance."

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"We have to," explained Gregory. He grinned boyishly, "We already have."

"Strangely enough that almost makes sense," admitted Dumbledore. He returned his attention to the translation he was holding and settled it on top of the case containing the original tablet. His brow furrowed slightly in a frown as he asked the question that had been worrying him since Fleur had finished her initial translation. "Are you certain nothing can be done about this?"

With a sigh Gregory rose to his feet, Hilary right beside him and holding his hand. They shared a look for a moment and shook their heads sadly before Gregory answered wearily, "Harry is going to die - and there's nothing you can do to prevent it."

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14. Unexpected Proposal

The teachers of Hogwarts had spared no expense in the decorating of the Great Hall for this year's Yule Ball, which was taking place this Christmas Eve, rather than Christmas Day. This was primarily in order to bolster the flagging spirits of the students, who were still under the pall of depression which had settled over the school following Draco Malfoy's attack during the first Practical Fighting Techniques class of the year.

The walls of the Great Hall were dusted with glittering frost and the floor was coated in a thin layer of snow, all specially charmed not to melt. A dozen massive Christmas trees were arrayed along the walls and were covered in so many decorations that their branches sagged and groaned under the weight. Wreaths of mistletoe and ivy abounded, festooned across the hall and hanging beneath the high ceiling, which had been enchanted as a crystal clear moonlit night.

As with the prior balls the four house tables had been replaced by a hundred round tables, each large enough to seat five couples. The tablecloths were a pale, icy blue, trimmed with white frost. Sparkling ice sculptures adorned the dining tables as centrepieces - each one different from the last. Hundreds of tiny fairies, glowing white and blue and yellow, flitted here and there, giggling merrily as they swooped over, between and sometimes under the tables.

"Professor Flitwick has outdone himself," commented Harry as he and Ginny entered the hall, Harry dressed a set of deep crimson, scarlet and black dress robes. Ginny, one arm curled around his extended elbow, was wearing the new azure and jade robes that her parents had bought for her fifteenth birthday.

"Yes," she agreed, "though I think it's really amazing he and the other teachers were able to put everything up in only a single afternoon."

As they slowly ambled their way further into the hall they were greeted by those couples who had already entered. Dean, Seamus, Lavender and Moira waved at them from the table they were sitting at, having saved the seats for them. Neville and Cho, who would not be sitting with them this year, were across the hall with a group of Cho's Ravenclaw friends.

Harry was amused to note that Crabbe and Goyle, dressed the same horrible green dress robes they had worn two years before, were once again unaccompanied. Ever since their participation in the Halloween cabaret, and their truly atrocious singing, no girl in the school would dare to touch them with a fifty-foot dragon-prod.

~They look like a pair of moss-covered boulders~ Ginny observed as they strode past the hulking pair, who were glowering lugubriously at their empty table.

We're definitely on the same wavelength then, he replied with a chuckle, *I had the exact same thought before the first Yule Ball, when they first wore those robes.*

Ginny giggled. *~Well, it's as true now as it was then.~*

Reaching their table, where the other Gryffindors were waiting for them, Harry drew a chair out for Ginny. Sitting down next to her, Harry exchanged hellos with his fellow sixth-year dormitory mates and their dates.

"Where's Hermione?" asked Seamus, who was sitting opposite him.

"Hospital Wing," answered Ginny, reaching for the goblet of pumpkin juice she had quietly requested upon taking her seat.

Harry elaborated, "She's visiting Ron. Wants to wish him a merry Christmas and tell him that he's a prat for standing her up tonight."

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Laughter enveloped the table as everyone there could easily imagine Hermione yelling at a comatose Ron for not being able to escort her to the ball. The image was particularly amusing as Harry pictured his friend lecturing the poor boy in that stern manner she could so easily assume, a copy of *Hogwarts: A History* in her hands as she did so.

"Now there's motivation for Weasley to wake up," intoned a wry voice, catching everyone's attention and halting their laughter.

Standing behind Harry and Ginny, dressed in form hugging, yet elegant, dress robes of a rich burgundy, was none other than Blaise Zabini. Her short bob of blonde hair framed her face like a halo of gold, a special charm giving it a faint ethereal glow. Her sparkling blue eyes were alight with good humour and her cherry red lips were curled up in amusement.

This is a relief, thought Harry, trying to keep a gobsmacked expression off his face. From the corner of his eye he could see that his fellow Gryffindors, with the exception of Ginny, were not succeeding in doing so. He hadn't seen any of them look so surprised since the previous Yule Ball when Neville had revealed Cho Chang to be his date.

~What do you mean?~ asked Ginny, who had arched one eyebrow up in amazement.

Harry tried not to smile as he pointedly turned to greet Blaise's date. *I was starting to worry that maybe he fancied me.*

~Harry!~

"Hullo, Colin," he said to the nervous Gryffindor standing by Blaise's side. He frowned as he looked the younger boy up and down, puzzled over something he could not place. It was slightly unusual to see Colin in anything other than black school robes, but there was something about the mousy-haired boy that seemed out of place now. When he realized what was bothering him he looked at Colin in

wonder and asked, "Where's your camera?"

"I told him to stop pointing that stupid thing at me or he'd be sitting on it," declared Blaise, smiling dangerously at Colin as he pulled out a seat for her.

Dean laughed and asked, "I gather he had the telephoto lens attached?"

Colin, who was blushing to rival a terribly embarrassed Weasley, ducked his head and took his place next to Blaise. He mumbled something under his breath and quietly ordered up a goblet of pumpkin juice from the menu.

"So, Colin, when did you ask Blaise to the ball?" asked Ginny with interest. Everyone leaned forward to hear his reply, but Blaise answered before he could.

"He didn't," the Slytherin girl declared, "I asked him."

Colin, still blushing, spoke up, "You didn't."

Blaise looked at him with raised eyebrows. "What?"

"You didn't *ask* me to escort you to the ball tonight," asserted Colin looking at her with a sardonic smile. "You *ordered* me to."

"I had to. Otherwise you'd never have got round to asking me in the first place," defended Blaise indignantly. She turned to the others, who were watching with growing amusement, and told them, "He came up to me after dinner on Halloween and spent ten minutes skirting the issue with all the tact of a politician."

"A' luist he managed tae plook oop enuif courage t' traee an' ask ye," noted Moira, sipping on her drink while Seamus shook his head in silent laughter.

Blaise nodded in agreement. "True. That's one of the reasons I accepted." She smiled at Colin, who was blushing again, and said, "He may seem a bit timid at first, but that famed Gryffindor courage occasionally shows itself."

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"A Slytherin going to the ball with a Muggle-born Gryffindor," observed Harry, "I imagine your housemates were less than thrilled."

"I'm my own person, Potter; I do what suits me not others. Besides, I was getting tired of having Malfoy's cronies continually throwing themselves at my feet," she explained with a slight shrug.

Lavender asked, "What did you do when they tried?"

Blaise gave a typically Slytherin smirk, "Stood on them."

The Gryffindors exploded into laughter at the thought of Blaise, who was not even half their size, treading on a prostrate Crabbe and Goyle. As the laughter slowly died down Colin looked at Blaise and admitted, "That's one of the reasons I asked. Or tried to. You're not like most of the other Slytherins."

"What're the other reasons?" she asked with some curiosity.

"Well... you have a great butt."

"I can't believe he said that," said Hermione as Harry and Ginny recounted the story to her at one of the buffet tables arrayed along the side of the Great Hall. Hermione, who had been with Ron in the infirmary, had arrived just before the feast had begun and had missed most of the conversation surrounding Blaise and Colin's attendance together.

"He did," confirmed Harry, sipping on his goblet of apple juice. The feast was now over and the hall had been cleared of the many dining tables to make room for a dance floor. He had already danced with Ginny through several slow pieces, as well as a couple of faster paced songs sung by the Hex Girls, a band of witches Dumbledore had hired for the evening.

Ginny laughed. "And I always thought Ron was the most tactless man I'd ever meet."

Hermione had to chuckle and then tease, "I don't know, Ginny. Fred and George are definitely not known for their diplomacy. And don't get me started on Harry..."

"Me?" asked Harry, sounding slightly affronted.

"You," confirmed Hermione, grinning mischievously. She patted him on the shoulder in mock commiseration and said, "It's not your fault. You're a man - you can't help it."

"I can be diplomatic and tactful," Harry declared, folding his arms across his chest and glaring at the two young women. His disgruntled expression was slightly ruined by the faint smile curving around his mouth and the bemused twinkle in his eyes.

"Oh really?" teased Hermione.

Harry, scowling playfully at her and Ginny, nodded authoritatively. "Yes!"

Hermione tried to look sceptical and said, "Then prove it."

She watched as Harry exchanged a quick look with Ginny. Though not a word was spoken she had the strangest feeling that an entire conversation was taking place. It was uncanny, yet Hermione had seen them do this a hundred times since school began. If she weren't a natural sceptic, and if such a thing weren't completely impossible, Hermione might think they were communicating telepathically or by some similar means.

Oh, stop being ridiculous, Hermione, she berated herself. Telepathy. Really! Where do I get these wild ideas? Ron's natural gullibility must be rubbing off on me.

Her attention was reclaimed when Ginny kissed Harry and trailed a hand suggestively down his front and slipped it under his robes. She giggled and whispered something to him that brought a touch of pink to his cheeks and made Harry arch both eyebrows up to his hairline. He looked at her and said, "It's a good thing I'm wearing these dress robes, otherwise my anticipation would be blatantly obvious."

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Ginny giggled. "Then make sure you don't dance too closely with Hermione."

"Ginny!" gasped Hermione, feeling the blood rush to her cheeks.

"You're trying to get me into trouble, aren't you?" accused Harry his girlfriend. Receiving only a knowing grin as a reply, he turned to Hermione and bowed deeply. Extending a hand he asked with a dramatic flourish, "Hermione, would you, as my dearest friend, do me the honour of accompanying me onto the dance floor?"

"D'you promise not to step on my toes?" she asked.

Rather than looking offended, as she expected him to be, Harry actually blushed and ducked his head in embarrassment. "I asked Bill to give me some pointers over the summer," he said, looking up at her with a wry smile, "besides, from what Ron told me after last year's ball, *I'm* the one that should be worrying about my toes being trampled, not you."

Blushing at the unexpected retort, mostly because it was true, Hermione muttered, "I thought I made him promise not to tell anyone."

"Not to worry, Hermione," Harry assured her, "I believe there's a relatively simple solution."

"What?"

Harry grinned charmingly. "Let me lead."

"In that case," Hermione proclaimed regally, taking his proffered hand, "I shall be honoured to accept your gracious request for this dance."

Hermione saw Ginny rolling her eyes at their exaggerated acting. Harry, ever the gentleman, led her to the dance floor. With a deft motion, he twirled her about and then took her in his arms as they began to dance. The song they began dancing to was nearly over, so they did not really have a chance to get familiar with the motion. After a couple of minutes the piece ended and a slower paced tune began to play.

"So far so good," Harry teased as they swayed back and forth in time with the music. "See? No stomped toes. No broken bones. No sprained backs. In fact, you dance very well."

"Thank you." They continued dancing for a while, then Hermione said, "You dance very well too. I'd say Bill was a good teacher."

"You can tell him that tomorrow," said Harry. He paused, slightly changing the rhythm of their movements, and then said, "The entire family are coming to visit tomorrow."

She nodded and then, remembering something Ron had told her, asked, "Did you ever find out what Bill was doing at Hogwarts at the start of summer?"

Hermione was referring to the fact that, during the frantic time when Ginny had felt that Harry had been shot by Vernon Dursley, Dumbledore had arrived at Privet Drive with Bill in tow. He had apparently been visiting the headmaster for something, though had not mentioned what. Hermione had taken an interest in the incident after hearing that Fleur Delacour, Hogwarts' new Ancient Runes professor, had also been present.

Harry nodded and told her, "Yeah. Apparently the Gringotts branch in Egypt were excavating a site in Hamunaptra and found a stone tablet with some kind of Sanskrit written on it. None of their interpreters were able to translate the dialect, so Bill brought it here. Dumbledore gave it to Fleur to work on."

"That must've pleased him," Hermione suggested, recalling how Bill and Fleur had got along so well during their brief meeting before the third task of the Triwizard Tournament.

"I don't doubt it," agree Harry with a slightly lecherous smirk.

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Their conversation came to an abrupt, not to mention startled, end when a loud crash reverberated throughout the Great Hall. Everyone, whether dancing or standing by the buffet, came to a standstill and turned to the source of the disturbance. The main doors, leading out to the Entrance Hall, had been swung open and now revealed a lone figure.

Throughout the Great Hall eyes grew wide as saucers, jaws dropped to the floor and the music came to an abrupt halt. It was Terry Boot, who was dancing with Padma Patil at the time, that succinctly summed up the unexpected arrival of their intruding guest.

"Feetal's gizz! Lucius Malfoy?"

It was indeed Lucius Malfoy standing tall and proud at the entrance to the Great Hall. He was wearing stately black silk and velvet robes that were at odds with his status as wanted criminal on the run from the Ministry. His icy grey eyes were fixed solely on Harry, who had released his gentle hold on Hermione, and seemed quite unconcerned about the fact that he was on the wrong end of the several hundred wands pointed his way.

"Potter," he announced, his silky smooth voice ringing clearly through the hall, "I am here to deliver a message to you."

Now this is a pretty Christmas present.

Aye, that it is.

I don't know, thought Harry, watching Lucius closely as the Death Eater made his way further into the Great Hall. *He seems confident. Too confident.*

~Then let us show him the price of overconfidence~ Ginny growled, coming up to stand next to Harry and Hermione.

Lucius smirked arrogantly as he swept his cold gaze over those students, guests and professors who were aiming their wands at him. He shook his head and laughed in a mocking manner and scoffed at their watchful vigilance, "Do you really believe me so foolish to come here unprepared? I have a specially prepared Portkey within my robes. Any attempt to capture me, whether by magic or by

physical means, will cause it to activate. I will not be staying here any longer than I have to."

Harry nodded as he perceived the magic traces of the Portkey, which seemed to be some sort of amulet around Lucius' neck. His lips curled down fractionally at the realization that Malfoy could indeed escape from Hogwarts untouched if he needed to.

Can we disable it? he asked silently, watching Lucius approaching him.

Maybe, admitted Merlin, **However it will take time.**

And a fair bit of energy if we can't physically touch it either.

~How much time?~ asked Ginny, eagerly fingering her wand as the silver haired wizard drew to a halt several paces away. Harry could feel the anger, doubtless a product of the fact that it was Draco who brought about Ron's current condition, which she was directing towards the man now standing before them.

Fifteen, twenty minutes.

Harry considered, then asked, *What's the process?*

As the Order began filling their minds with the information he and Ginny would need to deactivate Lucius' Portkey, Harry outwardly turned his attention to the waiting Death Eater. He had to keep the man busy long enough to disable his escape route. Arching an eyebrow he asked, "Since when were you Voldemort's messenger boy, Malfoy?"

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~Got it~ declared Ginny as the Order finished their instruction. Harry could see her focus her powers on Malfoy, though the process was not visible to anyone but the two of them. *~I'll start with the grounding element, that way if we don't have enough time he won't be able to reach his proper destination.~*

Arry, suggested Joan, **you should work on ze activation trigger - zere it is.**

Got it, he acknowledge, edging his aura towards Malfoy.

Lucius glared dangerously at him, but was holding his tongue for the moment. Dumbledore and several of the professors had come down onto the dance floor and joined them. Harry was aware of McGonagall, Snape and Hagrid stepping into place on either side of Ginny, Hermione and himself. As Dumbledore spoke Harry wondered where the Proteuses were, since he could not see nor sense them anywhere inside the Great Hall.

"This is unexpected, Lucius," the headmaster said. Dumbledore's voice was brimming with stern authority and he radiated the same sense of quiet power Harry had last seen when the venerable wizard had burst in on Barty Crouch Junior at the end of the Triwizard tournament.

I can feel his aura growing, commented Iphicles quietly.

Isis agreed softly, **I would have loved to see him in his prime.**

Dumbledore peered over the rims of his half-moon spectacles with a severe expression as he observed, "The last time Voldemort had a message for us he used his serpentine friend, Nagini was her name I believe, to deliver it."

"He's not as important as he thinks he is," declared Hermione, who was glowering at Lucius in a manner that would have melted lead. Her wand was firmly grasped in her left hand and, though her arm was not extended, aimed right at Malfoy's stomach.

Ginny nodded in agreement. "Yeah. He's obviously expendable."

"Hardly child," sneered Lucius haughtily. His voice was laced with pride when he continued, his chest puffed out in self-importance. "I am the only one of his many servants that the Dark Lord trusts, other than himself, to initiate these negotiations."

"Negotiations?" repeated Dumbledore as a soft murmur swept through the room as everyone began whispering amongst themselves. It was a well-known fact that the Dark Lord did not negotiate for anything with anyone. He simply took what he wanted, usually by force. That Malfoy should speak of negotiations was causing a stir.

Somehow, observed Harry with a frown, *I get the feeling something surprising is about to happen.*

Lucius' next words silenced the Great Hall more effectively than a Killing Curse.

"My Lord Voldemort wishes to discuss a truce."

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15. Uninvited Guests

Hermione was looking at Hagrid, who was looking at Snape, who was looking at McGonagall, who was looking at Dumbledore, who was looking at Ginny, who was looking at Harry, who was looking at Lucius Malfoy with wide eyes and a gaping mouth.

"A truce," Harry finally managed to say, after nearly a minute of silence.

"Yes," confirmed Malfoy, his face twisted in an unhappy grimace, "a truce."

Harry shook his head in wonder and asked, "What have you been smoking?"

~And where can I get some?~ he heard Ginny think. Oddly enough Harry could not tell if she was being serious or not, but considering the circumstances he was willing to dismiss the question as something shock-induced.

Malfoy sneered, "Unfortunately I have not been indulging in anything. My Lord Voldemort wishes for me to negotiate a truce between his forces and your own."

"Why me?" asked Harry, puzzled. "Why come to me and not Dumbledore?"

"The Dark Lord knows where the *true power* of the light lies, Potter," growled Malfoy, the distaste he obviously felt audible in his voice. He waved a hand, dismissively, at Dumbledore and the others and said, "Dumbledore is a weak and tired old man, his power is no longer a match for Lord Voldemort now that he has returned, infused the strength of your own blood. He knows that you are the only one who has the potential to equal him in power."

There was a moment of silence as everyone contemplated this startling revelation. Harry made sure to watch Malfoy closely, wondering if perhaps this was some trick of Voldemort's. He was satisfied to

see that the Death Eater was as surprised, and worried, as everyone else. Then the cry was repeated -- louder, closer-- and in chorus.

Harry shared a look with Ginny and together they extended their senses outwards. It was not easy, navigating around the morass of magic that permeated Hogwarts, but together they were able to look beyond the walls of the castle and to the grounds. What they found was alarming.

"Shit," Harry cursed, earning surprised looks from everyone.

"What is it?" asked Hermione apprehensively.

It was Ginny that answered, her voice grim, "Unless we are very much mistaken... Draco has sent us some friends of his to play with."

There were five of them. Once they had been Common Welsh Greens, a breed of dragon with smooth green scales that was --well, as the name implied-- fairly common in the British Isles. Now, however, they were twisted and warped shadows of their true selves. Literally, for Draco's manipulations had turned the massive beasts into creatures of impenetrable black and biting cold.

"You didn't mention anything about the Well being able to do this," remarked Snape waspishly as they stood on the ramparts facing the Forbidden Forest.

The rest of the staff, the fifty Aurors stationed at the school, as well as a good many of the more adventurous students, were arrayed there. Several people were conspicuously absent. Most noticeably Lucius Malfoy, who had activated his Portkey immediately after identifying the dragons as his son's work. Then there was the husband and wife pair of Gregory and Hilary Proteus, of whom nobody had seen hide nor hair of the entire evening. Still, there were close to two hundred people on battlements, watching as the five shadowy dragons circled in the night sky.

"We didn't mention it, because we didn't know he could do it," retorted Ginny, her eyes fixed on the five winged shapes that crossed back and forth high above them.

Beside her, Harry nodded and silently asked the Order, *~At least you lot certainly never told us about the Well of Shadows altering living creatures into... whatever these things are.~*

None of the previous Wells have ever done anything like it, Merlin offered as an excuse.

Somehow that does not make me feel better, said Ginny.

It's not our fault.

It 'as been several zousand years since ze last Well, said Joan. **Osiris and Isis should 'ave been ze ones to know its capabilities.**

Osiris defended his wife and himself by stating, **Anubis preferred to conjure up sandstorms and plagues. He never gave any indication of being able to manipulate dragons or anything else.**

~Great~ groaned Harry, tensing as one of the shadows bellowed. *~That's just what we need. Malfoy showing that he can be innovative.~*

Any suggestions? Ginny asked.

"Any suggestions?"

The two teenagers turned to see that Dumbledore had come to stand next to them. Just behind him was Professor McGonagall and Duncan Idaho, the senior Auror in charge of the division that was now permanently stationed at Hogwarts.

Not much we can do from here, admitted Alexander reluctantly. **If the Well has managed to change these dragons into creatures of pure shadow - normal magic will not have much effect against them.**

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"Only the Order has enough power to deal with these creatures as they are," Harry said. Idaho seemed a bit unwilling to accept this, but a hand from Dumbledore stilled him. Harry continued, "It would be best if you let me handle this."

'Me'? Don't you mean let 'us' handle this? asked Ginny, not liking the implications of how Harry had phrased that last bit.

~No. I'll be handling this situation alone~ he answered.

"What d'you mean by that?" she asked, scowling unhappily at him.

"I'm going to go out to meet them," Harry told her. He smiled grimly and looked to where the dragons were cruising low over the Forbidden Forest and said, "After all, if you'd think back to the last time you saw five dragons, you would remember who it was that brought them down."

For a moment Ginny puzzled over his words, but then the memory came back to her and she stared at Harry in disbelief. She shook her head and waved towards the dragons. "Dammit, Harry, those are live dragons we're talking about! Real ones! They're not a state of mind for your base instincts to tear limb from limb!"

Harry frowned. "My Animagus form is the only thing that can match those creatures in a head-to-head fight. I doubt Draco's imbued them with much strength beyond what they had before he altered them. With you and everyone else providing support and distraction from down here, I have a good chance of defeating them."

You are out of your mind!

~You've told me this before~ he replied, *~has it ever been able to stop me?~*

"Fine, then I'm going with you," Ginny declared staunchly, folding her arms and glaring at him, challenging him to try and stop her.

"No you won't," Harry protested. "I can fly, you can't."

Gritting her teeth Ginny had to admit, albeit reluctantly, that Harry was right. Not only was her Animagus form unable to fly --something that would doubtless prove useful in battling a clutch of dragons-- she would also be a great deal smaller than her opponents. Harry's form, however, was

easily capable of surviving a one-on-one fight with such creatures. But against five of them...

It was Dumbledore that spoke. "How do you want us to help, Harry?"

"Get the students into the Practical Fighting Techniques auditorium," Harry ordered, turning to appraise the waiting Dragons, which had come to ground at the edge of the forest, not far from Hagrid's hut.

"From what we can tell, these things are similar to Dementors," added Ginny, reaching down to grasp one of Harry's hands in her own. "Not identical, not by a long shot, but close enough that a Patronus might be able to slow them down. At the very least they'll be a distraction that Harry can use to his advantage."

Dumbledore nodded in understanding. "Then I shall request that any students capable of producing a Patronus remain to lend what assistance they can."

"Have whoever's looking after the other students activate the school's shields and lower the auditorium," suggested Harry, squeezing Ginny's hand and turning to face her. "Our repairs and modifications to the Situation Map might not be finished, but everything else is in working order. I think it best that we get those we can out of harm's way and also prevent the dragons from possibly entering the school."

"Minerva, see to it," ordered Dumbledore. "I shall remain here to organise the students."

"Very well, Albus," agreed McGonagall, who immediately departed back into the school.

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Harry are you sure about this? Ginny asked him, pulling him into a hug. She could all too clearly remember the last time Hogwarts had been under siege. The hundreds of Dementors had laid a pall of cold over the school, which some of the younger students still had nightmares about, and Harry had come far too near death's door for Ginny's comfort.

~Don't worry, Gin~ he assured her, holding her in his arms. Harry released one hand and took hold of her chin, tilting her face up to his for a tender kiss. Stroking her cheek with his fingers he smiled softly at her, *~As long as you're here, nothing too bad will happen to me.~*

It was odd, Harry mused, how he could be in the midst of a life and death battle against five incredibly dangerous opponents and yet at the same time be worried about where Hagrid was going to sleep the next night.

The five dragons, or rather the creatures the dragons had become, had fallen upon the cosy wooden house with unbridled fury. Draco's manipulations had removed the dragons' ability to breathe fire, but their sheer physical strength had not been diminished. Hovering unsteadily in the air Harry could see the shattered remains of Hagrid's house below him as he struggled against the wrestling form of one of the three remaining dragons.

With help from Ginny and the others spread across the castle's ramparts, Harry had managed to eviscerate the first dragon he had gone up against with little effort on his part. Silvery Patroni had lit up the midnight sky with their glow, weakening the dragon enough for Harry to shred its belly and throat with his gleaming claws.

Unfortunately the element of surprise, as well as the concerted effort of those lending their aid, was no longer available for Harry to take advantage of. The remaining dragons had quickly flung themselves into the fray and it was all Harry could do to hold them off. The many Patroni and other spells from those on the castle walls were distracting the dragons, yes, but Harry was not having as easy a time of it as he had originally expected.

Ginny managed, through their link, to provide most of his aid against whichever opponent he was currently fighting. The rest were reduced to little more than colourful displays of light and noise that served to distract and confuse those dragons Harry was not grappling with.

The second dragon to fall had done so nearly ten minutes earlier and Harry had yet to make any progress against the surviving three. The trouble stemmed from the fact that the remaining dragons seemed to be taking turns, although their actions did not appear to be coordinated in any way. It was simply that they all seemed to want a piece of Harry and had several times pulled each other off him in order to have the dubious honour of fighting him themselves.

Needless to say Harry was rapidly finding himself being worn down.

//AAAAARRRRGGGHH!//

The dragon Harry was struggling against had somehow managed to latch its jaws onto his left arm, biting down hard and ripping at the flesh. Gasping in pain he pulled his other arm free and reached across to claw at the dragon's face. The creature resisted at first, now so much stronger than normal, but eventually Harry was able to pry it loose.

~Harry!~ came Ginny's cry from below them, *~Swing around, now!~*

Thrusting with his wings Harry managed to pivot himself and the struggling dragon about in the air, bringing the dragon round towards the castle. He narrowed his eyes against the glaring light as a dozen Patroni streaked through the air to slam into the dragon's exposed back. The shadow beast roared in anger and twisted in Harry's grasp.

It was enough, however, for Harry to strike a fatal blow.

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Lunging his head forward and spreading his strong jaws wide, Harry tore at the dragon's exposed throat. Biting down fiercely Harry could feel his golden fangs sinking into the shadowy non-flesh and with a jerk he ripped his head back. A spray of black blood erupted from the dragon's throat and the creature gave a strangled gurgle as it fought hopelessly against Harry. Its claws tore into his chest and arms, but Harry ignored its struggles and forced his wings to lift them higher as he battled to lever

himself above the dying beast.

With a hiss of pain as the dragon slashed a deep line across his chest, Harry smashed a fist into its face. For a moment the dragon ceased its wild thrashing and Harry gripped it firmly with both hands and swung himself around and onto its back. Howling in protest the dragon writhed and bucked in an attempt to pull free, but Harry clung to it like a limpet. With a bestial roar he slashed his talons into its wings, tearing through the leathery membranes easily.

Kicking off against its back, Harry rose higher into the air as the crippled creature plummeted to the ground. He watched as the dragon crashed on top of the ruins of Hagrid's hut, a long and jagged wooden beam spearing through its torso. Shrieking in what had to be unbearable agony the animal writhed and jerked for long seconds before finally falling limp.

~Three down~ declared Ginny with satisfaction.

Two to go he finished, trying not to let the pain he was feeling seep into his thoughts, even though he knew Ginny was fully aware of his condition.

Blood was seeping from gashes to his arms, legs and across his chest. His muscles ached with every motion he made and Harry was certain --if you could see beneath the thick white fur which covered this form-- that his entire body would be a mass of bruises. Both of his wings were more than a little tattered, from his recent midair wrestling match, and he was worried that perhaps something in his left wing was either sprained or torn or broken.

The worst, however, was the cold.

Harry had never believed anything could be colder than the chill which surrounded Dementors like a cloak. Apparently he was wrong, for the frigid cold these shadow creatures Draco had created seemed to seep into every pore, fibre and cell of his body. It blanketed his entire being in the same way the bitter cold of winter settled over the highlands, only worse. It penetrated his body, his muscles and bones, with a relentless numbness. If it weren't for the power of the Order and the innate magic of his Animagus form, he would not have lasted this long.

Not only that, but the cold was beginning to affect his mind - distracting him, which was probably how the last two dragons managed to sneak up on him so easily.

~Harry look out!~

//Oh shit!// he exclaimed as he looked up just in time to see the two surviving dragons barrelling towards him, wings spread wide and taloned arms outstretched. One tackled Harry at the waist, both arms snaking around his body crushing him in a vicious bear hug. The other dragon whipped past and snapped its long tail in his face like a whip. The first dragon, after raking his back with its claws, flung him to one side and swept off to join its companion, leaving Harry to his own devices.

It was funny in a way, Harry thought as he fell in a daze to the ground, how he seemed to spend an inordinate amount of time falling from great heights. Perhaps Hermione had the right idea and he should keep his feet firmly on solid ground in the future.

****Do a spell! Any spell!**** came a frantic shout from the Order.

I'm trying, he replied, noticing that the earth seemed to be rushing up to meet him with indecent haste. He twisted as he fell and tried to flip himself over. *Give me a minute!*

****I think we've only got about five seconds!****

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As it turned out, it was less than that. Harry slammed into the ground in a thunderous crash that shook the foundations of the castle. He heard loud cracks as several ribs and one of his wings were broken upon impact. Blinking his eyes rapidly Harry tried to roll onto his hands and knees, but found that the world was spinning to and fro beyond his ability to balance.

//Ugh!// he grunted, forcing himself to move regardless of the waves of dizziness that were assaulting his senses. Shaking his head, in a foolish attempt to clear his blurred vision, he asked, *How was that?*

****I've seen better,**** was Isis' dry reply, ****but at least you're not dead yet.****

"Harry!"

Looking up Harry saw that he had crashed close to the castle wall and Ginny, in a state of mild panic, was almost directly above him. Wearily he raised a hand and tried to smile at her as he thought, *Not to worry, Gin, I'm okay.*

"Behind you!" cried both Dumbledore and Idaho, who were standing on either side of Ginny. They were pointing frantically and both summoned up a Patronus as Harry spun around.

The two dragons had landed near the edge of the Forbidden Forest, just over fifty yards from where Harry was crouched. Hulking low and seeming to blend into the perpetual darkness of the forest, the two shadows began to slowly stalk towards the castle. They were moving side by side, the tips of their wings just brushing against each other.

Harry's eyes narrowed to thin slits as he watched a score of Patroni and other spells streak down from the wall behind him. The dragons were being buffeted by enough magic to kill just about anything, but they were only slowed down, weathering the waves of energy that came at them with almost contemptuous ease.

With a low, almost inaudible growl, Harry began to charge.

In less than half a dozen steps he was already moving at a full sprint, crossing the distance between the castle wall and the approaching dragons in a matter of seconds. His ribs hurt like Hell and it was all he could do to ignore the stabbing pain which lanced through his chest with every step he took. In a way the pain drove him on, provoking the simmering ferocity that always seemed to bubble within him whenever he changed into this form. Letting the pain fuel his growing ire, all Harry really had to concentrate on was his broken wing, which hung limply from his back and caused him to lean slightly to the left. At the very last moment he *bucked* down and rolled towards them, gritting his teeth in pain

With a hiss he leapt up, immediately between the startled dragons, and twisted. His left wings arced out wide, the razor-sharp golden tips of the feathers slicing into the one dragon's belly. As he moved, Harry kicked out and snapped one clawed foot across the face of the second dragon. Landing nimbly, for a creature of such great size, he continued to spin around and brought his other leg and its glistening claws up for a second bone shattering spinning kick to the dragon's face, rending the scaly flesh into bloody ribbons. With pained roars both dragons collapsed, one clutching at its savaged underside, the other nursing the one side of its face.

//Got them!! he exclaimed, hopping back a dozen yards. If his face had been capable of it he would have grinned, but he settled for baring his golden fangs in satisfaction.

I think so. Just let me... finish... them... Harry's thoughts trailed off as the dragons turned on each other and seemed to embrace. For a moment it looked as if they were trying to comfort themselves, but this impression quickly faded as their great shadow forms, dripping with a thick black ichor, began to merge. Harry looked on in horror and groaned. //You have got to be kidding me.//

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I think I'm in trouble, Harry observed as the two badly injured dragons seemed to liquefy and blend into each other. It was not unlike watching two wax statues melt and slowly amalgamate into a single lump, but still retain their original shape.

"RRRIIEEEEEAAAAAAAAAARRRRHHHHNNN!!"

One unbelievably strong hand was gripping him by the throat, slowly tightening around his airways. Harry reached up and tried to pry the dragon off, but it grabbed his arm with its free hand and easily tugged his arm to the side. With what almost seemed like relish, it gave a deep growl that could pass for a chuckle, the dragon twisted viciously and Harry screamed in pain as his right arm was wrenched from its socket, accompanied by a wet pop.

With almost demented glee the dragon twisted the claws it had buried in his side as it continued to strangle the life from him with its other hand. Its dark wings were spread wide and high, eclipsing Harry's view to just the impenetrable blackness and void which the dragon was swathed in. Dimly, as he struggled against its grip with his good arm, Harry could hear Ginny and the others up on the ramparts calling to him. He was having trouble making out their words and they sounded very far away.

The dragon seemed almost surprised, Ginny thought, as Harry's eyes glared at it from across the narrow gap between the two combatants. Its head had reared back a bit and it had stopped jabbing its claw into Harry's side. The two colossal creatures were poised in mid-struggle, as immobile as a bronze statue, though a grand one.

```
//RRRRRrrrr...//
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The Griffin's good arm swung up and he latched his hand around the wrist of the hand the dragon was using to strangle him with. There was a loud snap as he gave a deft twist and broke the dragon's wrist, ending the choking hold on his throat. Baring his gleaming gold fangs the Griffin forced his right leg up as the other beast howled in pain. With a roar that left Ginny's ears ringing, the Griffin kicked the

dragon off him.

//RRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHAAAAAAAHHHHHH
HH!!!!//

Ginny swallowed as she watched the dragon sail through the air, kicked by the Griffin with enough force that it actually managed to reach the edge of the Forbidden Forest. With a thunderous crash that uprooted several trees and caused them to collapse around it, the dragon tumbled to the ground. A trail of smoking black blood followed it, burning the grass it lay upon, and leading up to the now wounded monster's savaged right arm. The Griffin had never released his hold on the dragon's wrist and, combined with the kick, had torn the limb off at the elbow. Glancing down at the severed forelimb in his hand, the Griffin snarled and threw the bloody appendage to one side, before turning his attention to his own wounded body.

With what sounded like an almost human grunt of displeasure or annoyance, the Griffin clutched at his limp right arm. Growling he twisted to one side and with a deliberate motion slammed his shoulder into the stone wall he had so recently been pinned against. The impact held enough force to cause the entire wall to tremble, almost knocking several people to their knees, as the Griffin threw back his head and howled from the pain.

Another howl joined his and the Griffin spun around to face the dragon, which was clambering to its feet. With a rumble like approaching thunder, the Griffin seemed to consider his foe for a moment, flexing his right hand as if to test it. Apparently everything met with the Griffin's approval for he let loose a triumphant shriek and launched himself into the air with a single beat of his tattered but still magnificent wings.

The dragon had stumbled clear of the toppled trees it had crashed into, but this only left it open to the Griffin's assault. With a roar he dropped down on the dragon from above, smashing his right fist across its face. His left hand immediately shot up, from somewhere near the ground, and landed an uppercut to the dragon's jaw that lifted the massive beast off its feet.

Relentlessly, in a display of such savage fury that nobody watching could bring themselves to speak, the Griffin fell upon the fallen dragon like an enraged demon. His arms were rising and falling in a blur, sprays of thick black blood arcing with each stroke of the Griffin's taloned hands that were ripping and tearing at the dragon.

A bloodthirsty scream rent the air as the Griffin leapt to his feet and kicked at the dragon's chest before grabbing it by its whipping tail and hauling it closer to the castle. The shadow enshrouded beast struggled and twisted about, but all this accomplished was to allow the berserk Griffin to come at it from behind.

Bellowing he straddled the writhing dragon's narrow middle and grabbed firm hold of its one wing. Somehow the dying animal must have known what he was attempting, for it seemed to redouble its efforts and grow frantic in its attempt to escape, but the Griffin was relentless. Its muscles strained and rippled and bunched beneath its thick white fur. Lifting one leg and jamming his knee into the small of the dragon's back, the Griffin heaved and pulled with ever ounce of its unmatched strength.

Sweet and merciful heavens, Ginny thought, bringing her hand up to her mouth in horror as the Griffin began to literally tear the dragon apart. With a sickening noise that sounded like wet fabric being ripped, the Griffin wrenched the wing he was pulling on free.

The dragon screeched in unsurpassable agony as its wing was torn from its back. Joining its scream of pain was the Griffin's roar of delight and triumph as blood fountained from the gaping wound. With a cruel hiss he tossed the twitching appendage to one side before resuming his earlier hacking at the dragon's body.

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"*Mon dieu!*" Ginny heard Fleur choke out. Not surprisingly the Ancient Runes professor was a pale green in colour and was visibly struggling against being sick. More than one person, mostly students and younger Aurors, had failed and were retching miserably as they turned away from the butchery that the Griffin was dealing out.

"What in Hades' name is he doing?" asked Snape, watching as the Griffin rolled the near dead dragon onto its ravaged back. With a howl the shimmering white Animagus raised both arms above his head before plunging them deep into the dragon's chest. The dragon was barely moving, even as the Griffin tore its chest open, splintering its ribs, and exposed its steaming black insides.

Ginny grit her teeth and fought down the bile she could feel rising in her throat as she watched the Griffin eviscerate his foe. Licking her lips she said weakly, "Harry's... a little out of control right now." Snape looked at her in disbelief. "You call that *a little*?" he asked, pointing at the scene as the Griffin tore the dragon's heart out and crushed it in his fist, spraying blood in all directions. Snape shook his head and exclaimed, "That isn't Potter, that's a monster!"

//RRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRAAAAAAAAAAAAAAWWWWWWWWWWWRRR
RRRR!!!!//

The Imperial Arch Griffin, having effectively slaughtered his enemy, threw his head back and roared his victory. The cry rang through the air and threatened to shatter every window in Hogwarts had it not been for the Unbreakable Charms that safeguarded each pane. The crushed dragon's heart dropped to the ground beside the mangled and blood-strewn carcass as the Griffin revelled in his conquest.

At least now it's over, Ginny thought.

Then, to the alarm of everyone watching, the Griffin turned his flaming green eyes towards the castle and growled.

//RRRRRRrrrrr...//

Nobody could mistake the vicious gleam in the Griffin's eyes as anything but eager anticipation for

battle. He wanted to continue, to fight again and again, to revel in the bloodlust that was consuming him. In that moment a boundless fear grew within the hearts of all those watching, for they knew that what was standing over the ruined and gutted body of the dragon was not Harry Potter, but something far, far more dangerous. Something they would not be able to stop.

Ginny, you have to stop him, declared Merlin's voice, which to her surprise sounded as stunned and uncertain as Ginny felt.

Stop him? she repeated, shaking her head. *How? You - you saw what he just did! How can I stop that - that... how?*

Sun Tzu's calm, yet stern voice answered, ***You did it before, you will do it again.***

Ginny protested, *That was different! That wasn't real! It was a state of mind where I was able to meet him as an equal. I can't do that here.*

You have to do something, came the reply, ***before he does.***

Knowing that the Order was correct, Ginny swallowed nervously and Apparated off the battlements and down onto the lawn. The Griffin whirled to face her, forgetting about the castle as he saw her suddenly appear not fifty feet away. His eyes narrowed to fine slits as he growled menacingly and took a earthshaking step towards her.

Ignoring the cries of alarm and horror from those still standing on the castle wall, Ginny lifted her hand to the Griffin, palm up. She tried to calm herself and keep the trembling in her voice to a minimum as she softly called Harry's name. The Griffin's eyes narrowed further and he took several deep breaths as it stared down at her. Slowly he relaxed his stance and tilted his head to one side, appearing to consider her as something other than a quick snack.

"Yes, Harry," she confirmed, nodding slowly, "it's me."

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A flash of light, like the famed aurora borealis, washed over the Griffin's form. There was a rush of air, a tinkling sound like glass breaking, and there he was. His clothes were in perfect order and not a trace of blood or dirt was evident anywhere on him. The only thing that marked him as having been in a fight was the absolute disarray of his hair --which really wasn't that great an indicator-- and the slightly glazed look in his vibrant green eyes.

"Harry?" she asked cautiously, slowly approaching him.

Harry looked at her, his eyes unfocused, and asked, "Did we do it?"

"Yes, Harry, we did it," Ginny told him. Her voice filled with pride as she reconsidered all that had just happened and rephrased her words, "You did it."

"Ha! We did it!" he exclaimed triumphantly. Then his bruised face took on a curious expression and, with a bubbly excitement, Harry pointed behind her, "Look! Lookie!"

Ginny curiously turned to where Harry was pointing, but saw nothing that could possibly cause him to grow so excited. He was pointing at nothing, absolutely nothing. Ginny returned her attention to Harry, who was swaying unsteadily on his feet and asked, "Look at what, Harry?"

"Buttered toast!"

At this point Harry, mercifully, passed out.

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16. Slumber's End

"I swear this boy spends more time in here than he does anywhere else!"

Nobody could rightly argue with Madam Pomfrey's assessment as she, assisted by Dumbledore and Snape, laid Harry down on one of the hospital beds. Ginny, who had followed right behind them as they had levitated the stretcher bearing Harry's unconscious body to the infirmary, actually found herself nodding in agreement, along with the rest of the Order.

Can't say I disagree with her, noted Merlin with a surprising amount of good humour, if you considered that Harry was currently insensate.

Aye, agreed Loki sounding almost sympathetic. He then proceeded to put his foot in it. ***In fact, young Harry here spends more time flat on his back than most whores I used to know.***

This was a remark that, had he known it, was calculated to offend almost everyone that heard it. Practically the entire female portion of the Order immediately took up arms and, from the sounds of it, seemed intent on separating Loki's head from his body. The only thing that saved the Norseman from joining the Headless Hunt was the fact that he was already dead, although this did not spare him from a sound thrashing.

Could you lot keep it down for the time being? asked Ginny with a martyred sigh.

"Is he going to be all right?" Hermione was asking, a hint of hysteria in her voice.

"I can't rightly say," admitted Madam Pomfrey with a frown. "The last time he was like this, he was physically fine, just as he is now. From what I understand it was Miss Weasley that was able to bring him back."

All eyes turned to Ginny, who had shifted to sit next to Harry on the hospital bed, taking one of his hands in hers. She looked up from his sleeping form and told them, "It's not that bad this time. The Animagus transformation always takes a lot out of him. Under ordinary circumstances it's never been a problem, but after a fight like that... he's just sleeping it off."

Madam Pomfrey seemed a bit dubious. "What about his injuries? Those dragons, shadows or whatever they were tore him up quite a bit. I saw them do it!"

Ginny wasn't too sure about that either. She could clearly remember seeing Harry's many injuries being inflicted, but upon regain his natural form the only thing to mark his encounter with the dragons was a smattering of already fading bruises and the fact that he was currently lying in the hospital wing.

I think I'm beginning to see a pattern emerging here, she thought as she recalled how, when he had

first accomplished the Animagus transformation, he had resumed his human form with the gunshot wounds his uncle had inflicted upon him perfectly healed.

It certainly seems that way, concurred Heracles.

It might even explain his current condition, said Osiris thoughtfully. **After all, the energy needed to effect his transformation into an Imperial Arch Griffin is prodigious. Combined with the restorative magic he used - no wonder he's out cold.**

"So, you're saying he unconsciously healed himself when he changed back?" Ginny asked, earning a few odd glances since she had spoken out loud. It had been the better part of six months that she had been able to 'talk' with the various members of the Order, and Ginny, unlike Harry, still had a tendency to occasionally physically speak rather than internalize her thoughts.

Trying to fight down the slight blush she felt at her lapse, Ginny explained her and the Order's reasoning. Everyone seemed satisfied, with the exception of Madam Pomfrey, but that was to be expected from the aging matron. Hermione, however, was so relieved to hear that Harry was just "sleeping it off" as it were, that she slumped bonelessly into the nearest chair.

"It's good to hear that Mr Potter is otherwise unharmed," commented a soft alto.

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It was an unusual sight that greeted everyone who turned towards the entrance to the Hospital Wing. Gregory and Hilary Proteus were striding into the infirmary, wearing the standard black robes favoured by the staff. This was not that unusual. What was unusual was that they were both rather damp. It looked as if they had just emerged from a shower and had flung their robes on without pausing to dry themselves first. Either that or they had been out for a midnight swim with the giant squid...

"Sorry we're late," apologised Gregory as he and his wife reached those assembled around Harry's bed. He ran a hand through his soggy brown hair and explained, "We ran into Sybil on our way in."

"Professor Trelawney? I imagine she's quite pleased with herself," muttered Hermione darkly from where she was sitting.

Gregory smiled a bit and said in a dry voice, "Yes, I understand she's foreseen Harry's demise on more than one occasion."

Hilary sniffed disdainfully. "Funny, he seems healthy enough."

"Of course he does," asserted Gregory. He arched an eyebrow as he settled himself down on the bed next to Harry's. "I'm not saying I'm anything like that fruit bat Trelawney--"

"Ahem," interrupted Dumbledore with a slightly chiding look on his face, even though his eyes were sparkling with amusement. Even Snape, who was standing behind the headmaster, seemed to find his fellow professor's disdain for Divination amusing.

"Sorry, Headmaster," Gregory apologised, but without sounding overly sincere. He grinned boyishly and turned back to Hermione and Ginny. "In any case, I foresee things getting better. Harry will wake up tomorrow morning, and Ron will be following close on his heels."

Please, God, Ginny thought desperately, let him be right.

He had been wandering for what seemed like an eternity. He wasn't sure, since time seemed to have little meaning in this place. It was incredibly frustrating, not to mention disheartening, as he sometimes felt it had been an age, or sometimes merely moments.

Merlin, I just wish there was someone to talk to, he thought as he trudged slowly across the seemingly endless plane that stretched before him.

He had long since concluded that this place was either a test of some sort --the gods only knew what-- or his own private hell. He was leaning towards the former because he was reasonably convinced that he wasn't dead. At least, he could not remember dying. After all, he believed that such an event was not something that would easily escape his attention.

And thus, he walked.

He had been wandering for what seemed like an eternity. He wasn't sure, since time seemed to have little meaning in this place. It was incredibly frustrating, not to mention disheartening, as he sometimes felt it had been an age, or sometimes merely moments.

Circe, I'm hungry. I wish I could find something to eat, he thought as he trudged slowly across the seemingly endless plain that stretched before him.

Unfortunately the barren landscape was devoid of anything. Absolutely anything, save the rocks, pebbles and sand. There was nothing for as far as he could see to break the dreary monotony of this place. Everything was dull and grey, even the sky which was perpetually overcast with a layer of thick, leaden clouds that never hinted at releasing their rain.

And thus, he walked.

He had been wandering for what seemed like an eternity. He wasn't sure, since time seemed to have little meaning in this place. It was incredibly frustrating, not to mention disheartening, as he sometimes felt it had been an age, or sometimes merely moments.

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Blimey, I'd give anything for a Butterbeer right now, he thought as he trudged slowly across the seemingly endless plane that stretched before him.

It was a depressing world he seemed trapped in. Nothing ever happened to disturb the perpetual blandness of it all, save the occasional hollow whistle that accompanied the chilling wind that sometimes blew across this barren wilderness. He had never thought he would ever encounter any place or thing more boring than Professor Binns. This place proved him wrong.

And thus, he walked.

And then, he stopped.

There, right in front of him, was a flower.

Herbology had never been his strongest or favourite subject, but at this moment he had never been so happy to find a plant. Carefully, lest he accidentally crush the tiny bloom, he sank to his knees and stared in awe at the flower, with its vibrant orange petals. He liked orange, which brought a grin to his face as he reached out with a trembling hand.

He paused just short of touching the flower and gaped in awe as diminutive shoots of lush green grass began to sprout up all around the solitary blossom. He watched, scarcely hoping to believe it as the grass seemed to rush outwards and cover the desolate wasteland, transforming it into a verdant meadow.

The previously flat landscape seemed to heave and swell all around him, rising and falling into rolling hills and long, shallow valleys. Groves of trees; oak and fir and birch and pine and all other sorts, erupted from the ground, growing to massive size in a matter of seconds. Millions of flowers sprang into being, dotting the thick carpet of grass here and there, in every colour imaginable and more. Lowlying walls of rock and stone, covering in layers of moss, seemed to pop up at the borders where hills and fields met. In the distance, perched unsteadily on the tops of some hills, twisting and convoluted stone towers grew into being.

Above him, when he looked up in wonder, the dull grey clouds were pierced by streams of golden sunlight. The thick blanket of clouds began to evaporate and disappear in great tracts, exposing a vibrant and rich blue sky. The deep pewter hue of the clouds lightened and transformed into a crisp white, highlighted by gold and orange and red and purple.

"Hullo, Ron. Fancy meeting you here," greeted an unexpected voice from behind him. Ron whirled around, almost falling over himself in his haste. He gaped in open-mouthed astonishment at the tall figure --dressed in deep crimson, scarlet and black dress robes-- that stood before him with a bemused look upon his familiar face.

"Harry?"

"Good to see you, mate," Harry smiled. "It's been too long."

Ron shook his head in relief and asked, "How'd you get here?"

"Well, y'see," his best friend began, looking very serious despite the devious twinkle in his bright green eyes, "James did something nasty with Lily. Nine months later..."

"Harry!"

It was now one o'clock in the morning, several seemingly endless hours after the attack on Hogwarts by Draco Malfoy's bastardized shadow-dragons. The professors had all retired once assured that Harry was not in any danger and that the rest of the students were safely installed in their respective dormitories. Even Madam Pomfrey had eventually quit the hospital wing, since it was apparent that her services would not be needed.

This left only Hermione and Ginny to sit silent vigil of Harry, having resisted all attempts by the teachers to evict them from the infirmary. Eventually, seeing their determination, Dumbledore had granted them permission to remain at Harry's bedside as long as they saw fit.

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And so, they sat.

Silently.

I feel so useless, Hermione thought sadly, watching the steady rise and fall of Harry's chest as he slept.

"I hate this," muttered Ginny, breaking the long silence for the first time since Dumbledore had left them earlier.

"What?" she asked, looking at her friend, who was sitting in the chair beside her.

Ginny waved her hand around in a vague motion and said, "This. Sitting around. Waiting. Being so utterly useless."

Hermione nodded. "I know the feeling."

"Now I know why Harry was so angry after Tom attacked Hogsmeade last year," Ginny said as they returned their gazes to the sleeping boy. "All those people being hurt and killed and he wasn't able to do anything about it. He must have felt so useless after that."

"That's Harry for you."

Both girls turned at the unexpected voice and the low creak of the door opening. There, entering the hospital wing en masse, was the entire Weasley family. Leading the pack were Arthur and Molly, closely followed by Percy and Bill, then the twins with Charlie --who had announced their arrival-- holding up the rear.

It was Molly that reached the young women first, enveloping first Ginny and then Hermione in ribcrushing hugs. The entire clan of red heads gathered into silent vigil around Harry's bed, Arthur and Molly pulling up seats on the other side from Hermione and Ginny. The five young wizards settled themselves in a half-circle around the foot of the bed, with Percy closest to their parents, then Bill and Charlie and then Fred and George, who came to stand next to Hermione.

And so, they sat and in some cases stood.

Silently.

"Let me get this straight."

Ron was so completely focused on 'getting it straight' that he failed to notice Harry rolling his eyes. His friend's reaction was perfectly understandable of course, though had Ron been aware of it he would undoubtedly have been more than a little put out by it.

Returning his gaze from the heavens to Ron, Harry nodded his head and spoke in a patient voice, not unlike an adult humoring a young child. "Okay."

"Hermione kissed you."

"Yes," admitted Harry, leaning back against the trunk of the large oak tree that he and Ron had settled under while discussing recent --and not so recent-- events. His head turned from side to side, much like a spectator at a tennis match, as Ron paced back and forth.

Ron shot him a narrow glance as he strode past. "She spent the night in your bed."

"Yes," said Harry as Ron dug a heel into the soft earth and spun around, coming back.

"With you and Ginny," he remarked as he walked over to Harry, continuing past him as he continued to pace. Despite the turmoil he could feel writhing inside of him, Ron somehow managed to keep his voice not only level, but almost completely devoid of inflection. For a Weasley, and especially for Ron, this was a measure of how disturbed he was by the news Harry had imparted.

"Yes."

He had swung around again and was now heading back past Harry. "Then Neville walked in on you."

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As he marched past Ron heard Harry chuckle softly before answering with a slight smile and a hint of amusement beginning to creep into his voice, "Uh huh."

"Everyone in Gryffindor knows," Ron bit out, stopping his pacing momentarily so that he could stomp up to his friend and glare at him. He peered into Harry's sparkling green eyes, which to Ron's disconcertion happened to be level with his own - a consequence of a growth spurt Harry had undergone during the summer after their fourth year. Ron was slightly thrown by this change, which he had never properly noticed before, despite having been aware of it for over a year now.

"Just about," agreed Harry, his eyes twinkling in a manner that put the agitated Weasley male in mind of Professor Dumbledore.

Resuming his pacing, this thought prompted Ron to ask, "Does Dumbledore know?"

Out the corner of his eye Ron could make out Harry's reaction, which for the first time during this questioning, was not one of amusement. Instead the Boy Who Lived allowed a slight frown to mar his brow as he visibly considered the matter. Finally he lifted his chin up and watched as Ron turned around. "He hasn't said anything about it."

Continuing to pace, Ron was walking past Harry for the umpteenth time when he hesitated and asked with a certain trepidation, "Are you... is Hermione..."

"No," Harry responded instantly and firmly shook his head, "it was only the once."

"Mione kissed you?" Ron asked, incomprehension coloring his voice.

Harry sighed, "I thought we'd already established that."

Ron looked suspiciously at him. "Why'd you let her kiss you?"

"I've already told you that as well," rejoined Harry, this time accompanied by a very martyred sigh of mounting annoyance.

"Tell me again," demanded Ron, who was still having trouble twisting his mind around this one piece of information. Being in a coma he could understand. Hermione being badly hurt he could accept, even if the idea pained him. Draco Malfoy becoming the embodiment of shadow he could live with, although he reserved the right to complain about the unfairness of it all.

Hermione kissing Harry he could simply not comprehend.

"She loves you."

Any thought processes that happened to be racing through Ron's mind came to such an abrupt and screeching halt that the young man's brain did the mental equivalent of falling over. There are just some things that it was not able to cope with and this revelation was one of them. As such almost all Ron's motor functions came to much the same type of abrupt and screeching halt as his mind did, which promptly resulted in the red-haired boy's legs entangling themselves and causing him to fall flat on his face.

After a few blank moments in which a small inner voice asked plaintively for the identity of the Hippogriff that had trampled over him, Ron turned himself over and stared up at Harry. His friend had pushed off the oak tree he had been leaning against and was strolling over to where Ron was picking himself up.

"Buh- bloody odd way of showing it," he finally managed to sputter, looking up at Harry as the other wizard extended a hand to help him upright.

"She was hurt, Ron," explained Harry as he pulled Ron up. "She still is."

"Hermione kissed you?"

Harry threw his hands up in pure frustration and began to pace where Ron had left off. "I realize the concept might be a tad difficult for you to grasp, Ron," he said, letting the edge of his impatience begin to show, "but if it's all the same to you, get over it. I'd like to wake up sooner or later."

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Ron glowered unhappily. "Ordinarily this is when I'd throw my common sense out the window and throw a punch."

"Ordinarily."

"You don't seem very concerned," he noted, arching an eyebrow.

"This isn't reality," Harry said with a shrug, reminding Ron that they were currently occupying a blend of their mental landscapes. A small, impish smile curved Harry's lips as he added in a teasing tone,

"Besides, there's a big difference between throwing a punch and landing a punch."

"Hmmm."

Harry groaned and walked right up to Ron, stopping a pace away. He placed his hands on his hips and

lifted his chin in presentation and said, "If it would make you feel any better, I promise not to duck." Ron continued to scowl. "I'm tempted to try."

"So," prompted Harry.

"So," echoed Ron, holding his hands close to his sides, clenched into tight fists.

"What are you going to do?" asked Harry as the moment stretched between them.

Ron sighed and seemed to deflate as he did so, the anger he was feeling leaving him as quickly as it had formed. Unclenching his fists he ran both hands through his hair and shook his head ruefully.

"Well, I will admit that I can sometimes be a little thick. Things that might be obvious to everyone else may occasionally escape my attention. I do, however, notice it when someone smacks me in the head with a Beater's bat."

Harry beamed happily at the sheepish Weasley and playfully punched Ron on the arm as he declared,

"I told Ginny you'd eventually work it out. I was right!"

"One of these days, Harry," growled Ron, favouring him with a disgruntled look, "you're going to be wrong."

Harry lifted a brow and smirked. "Maybe. Who knows, perhaps you'll even be there to see it happen, mate." He paused and then added, "Although, I doubt it."

Shaking his head at his friend's confidence, Ron swung an arm around Harry's shoulders as the pair began to trudge across a field of ankle deep grass. Taking a deep breath and savouring the sweet freshness of the air, Ron looked up at the deep blue sky.

"Let's go home."

Harry opened his eyes and silently took in the scene before him. He briefly contemplated the idea that he was still out cold and was simply hallucinating. Fred and George were standing at the foot of his hospital bed, both coloured from head to toe --including all their clothes-- in a brilliant neon pink.

Wait a moment. What's Zabini doing here?

The Slytherin girl was standing not far from the twins. She had one arm slung protectively around young Amber Fargo's shoulders and was looking at Fred and George with a mixture of smugness and indignation on her face. Seeing the way she was smirking at them, and remembering the prank they had pulled on the entirety of Slytherin the previous year, understanding blossomed in Harry's mind. Slowly, as his senses fully returned to him, Harry heard them having a friendly argument about the incident and Blaise's apparent revenge.

"I don't care," Blaise was saying, indignantly. "You turned me pink. For three days!"

"It was nothing personal!" Fred, or maybe George, tried to protest.

The other twin nodded in agreement. "We pranked the entire house! Besides which, it would've put you in a bit of a spot if you'd been the only Slytherin that wasn't pink."

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Blaise all but growled, "You turned me *pink*."

"And that's justification for turning us pink?" asked Fred, looking very flustered by this point.

"Yes!"

"Keep it down you three," ordered Charlie, who had been watching from the sidelines. His brown eyes were alight with amusement even as he told them, "This is a hospital after all."

Harry began to laugh softly, catching the attention of all those around him. As they all turned from the antics of the twins and Zabini, Harry realized that he had quite a good number of visitors surrounding him this time.

Arthur and Molly were sitting off to one side of him, both showing signs of the strain that had been burdening them for so many months. Immediately behind them was Percy, standing ramrod stiff and with a hand on the back of each of their chairs, looking upon the antics of his younger brothers with an air of palpable disapproval. Bill and Charlie were standing next to their parents, looking much as they always had, although Bill had surprisingly enough had his hair cut to what Molly would no doubt finally consider a suitable length for her eldest child.

Then there was Fred and George, at the foot of his bed and looking rather befuddled by their bright pink appearance, which Zabini had apparently inflicted upon them. Blaise, for her part, was as beautiful as she always was and accompanied by a somewhat nervous looking Amber. Apparently the older girl had informed her about Fred and George's unusual sense of humour, if her weary glances towards the two were any indication.

"Harry?"

He turned his head a fraction, feeling very tired and begrudging the movement. There, sitting on the other side of his bed, opposite Arthur and Molly, were Ginny and Hermione. The two young witches were on the edge of their seats and looking at him expectantly. It was Ginny who had spoken, half rising from her chair and staring at him with her wide, glistening brown eyes.

"I am beginning to become tired of this place," Harry remarked sourly, letting his eyes wander about the hospital wing. Then, with a bit of a wry smile, he looked down his bed at Fred and George and observed, "But at least there's entertainment."

Harry had just enough time to glance over at Ginny before she slammed into him, crushing him down into the bed. The brief look he caught of her face told him more in that one instant than a thousand words could manage. Without speaking, Ginny enveloped Harry in a tight embrace, pulling him into an almost seated position.

He held her close to him, his one free hand reaching around her slim waist and stroking the small of Ginny's back. After a few moments Ginny pulled back just enough for her to shift her head up and draw Harry into a scalding kiss that threatened to send him back into unconsciousness.

Dimly Harry was aware of one or two less than discreet coughs or throats being cleared, but he was too busy letting himself linger in the soft sensations of Ginny's full lips. Eventually, just as he began to worry about passing out from lack of breath, Ginny drew back so that she could look him in the eyes. "I shouldn't have done that," she said sternly, but with a smile.

"Why not?" he asked.

Ginny grinned ruefully and snuggled against him. "I was supposed to yell at you before I kissed you."

He laughed lightly, ignoring a soft sniff of amusement from Zabini, and allowed his hands to playfully caress her back. "I won't complain if you don't. Besides; it's Christmas."

"What's that got to do with anything?" she asked authoritatively.

"It wouldn't be right for you to start yelling at me, especially considering all the trouble I went through to get your gift..." he explained, trailing off as he pointedly looked beyond the bemused gazes of Arthur and Molly.

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Ginny followed his gaze, as did everyone else, and immediately leapt up from the bed. Her face was a picture of disbelief and delight that Harry would never forget.

"RON!!"

Indeed, standing in the doorway to his private room, was the youngest of the Weasley boys. He was swaying a bit unsteadily on his feet, having not used his legs for several months. Keeping a firm hold on the doorway so that he would not fall over, Ron smiled wanly at them all. His thin features were such a shade of pale green that Harry wondered if he wasn't producing chlorophyll.

Hermione was the first to react, leaping up from her seat alongside Harry's bed and staggering uncertainly forward. Hesitantly she approached the wobbling young wizard, eagerly drinking in the sight of him. Staring at him with wide, tear-filled eyes, Hermione came to a stop a couple of steps away, apparently unable to speak.

~You did this?~

Who else? replied Harry, reaching out to take Ginny's hand in his own, a smug smile twisting his lips as he watched his two best friends gaze at each other as if nothing else existed. *It was the least I could do for my friends and family.*

Ginny shook her head in amazement and squeezed his hand tightly, *~As soon as we get a minute alone with each other, I'm going to kiss you senseless.~*

Sounds appealing, he grinned, *I'm glad I woke up.*

"Well?" prompted Fred, as the silent reaction to Ron's emergence from his coma stretched over a minute. He waved a hand at his younger brother. "Aren't you going to say something?"

Looking into Hermione's eyes, as though she were the only other person in the world, Ron spoke. It was simple, direct, and by far the most complicated thing he had ever said to anyone in all of his sixteen years.

"I love you."

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17. What Passes For Normal

It was the first day back after the Christmas holidays. Winter was making itself known, seemingly intent on making up for its mildness the previous year. The snow lay nearly two feet deep on the ground, sometimes as much as three or even four. The sky was completely overcast with leaden grey clouds stretching from horizon to horizon.

Despite it being the first day back, and a frigid day at that, the students found themselves leaving the Great Hall after breakfast in a surprisingly cheerful mood. Common consensus was that this ebullience had something to do with the fact that upon entering the hall the students had found the house tables to be hidden beneath stacks of pizza. Nothing else to eat could be found with the exception of a variety of extra toppings that happened to be lying around.

Nobody could determine the reason for this, although some consideration was given to Moira's theory that the Weasley twins had somehow sneaked into the castle during the night and bribed the house elves.

Then there was the fact that, to go with the pizza, the only liquid refreshment available was a strange concoction that a few of the older Muggle-born students were able to identify as being Pina Coladas.

The Hufflepuffs in particular seemed rather taken by the miniature umbrellas that adorned the drinks, although Hermione doubted the colourful decorations were supposed to have been added - not that she knew anything about such matters, of course.

The staff were caught completely unprepared and by the time they realized the exact nature of the drinks almost the entire student population were, if not tipsy then at least feeling a pleasant warmth. Professor Trelawney, who had made a rare excursion down from her tower, loudly proclaimed the incident as a sign that Beltane was upon them. Since it was still the first week of January not even Lavender or Parvati took her seriously.

After some measure of order had been restored and vast quantities of pizza consumed the students marched --or in some cases swayed-- out the hall and to the first class of the day. It was then, during the Gryffindor and Slytherin sixth-years' Potions class, that an event took place which would forever label this day as the strangest day in Hogwarts' long history.

Professor Snape entered the classroom with a broad smile on his face.

It was only, however, when the normally temperamental professor opened his mouth to address the class that the dumbstruck students concluded that this was indeed a sign of the apocalypse. Either that or the Pina Coladas had been stronger than they had thought.

"Gooooood mornin' all you happy kiddies!!"

Hermione almost swallowed her tongue upon hearing this, but managed to limit her reaction to a muffled cough. After a moment to collect herself, she leaned close to Ron, who was sandwiched between her and Harry, and whispered in accusation, "What the devil did your brothers do to him?" Ron, not letting his eyes stray from the beaming Potions Master, shook his head in awe. "Not even Fred and George could pull off something like this."

Y'know, he's probably right, she thought, *besides, the twins are at the Burrow.*

On Ron's other side, Hermione could see that Harry, along with the rest of the class, appeared to be simply unable to form any coherent thoughts let alone a marginally understandable sentence. Instead of making any comment on this bizarre scenario, he was watching Snape with cautious eyes, as if expecting the tall man to suddenly draw his wand and start shooting Killing Curses in every direction.

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"Snape's gone mad," whispered Neville, who had partnered himself with Harry, since Hermione had pointedly refused to be paired with anyone other than Ron. The normally timid boy paused to watch as Snape cheerfully scribbled instructions onto the blackboard at the front of the class, using bright pink chalk to do so. Neville then summed up his feelings on the matter, "It's scary."

Harry nodded dumbly and said, "He's smiling."

"Of course I'm smiling," declared Snape, turning from the blackboard and grinning broadly at Harry in a companionable manner. "Why shouldn't I be? It's a wonderful morning. It's a wonderful day... it's a wonderful life!"

Tentatively Hermione raised her left hand, keeping her injured right arm tucked close to her side, and caught Snape's attention. He turned to face her and asked pleasantly, "Yes, Hermione? You have a question?"

Hermione swallowed nervously and asked timidly, "Professor Snape... are you feeling okay?"

"Never been better!" exclaimed Snape brightly. He grinned at her. "Seven points to Gryffindor for your marvellous interest in my wellbeing, Hermione. Actually, make it seventeen points. If you have any other questions, ask away. Come on, don't be shy."

There was a moment of utter, complete and unmatched silence as the assembled Gryffindors and Slytherins stared at their professor. Hermione blinked her eyes rapidly and, in a last ditch effort to try and wake herself from this daydream, pinched herself. Unfortunately all this accomplished was to produce a sharp pain in her thigh.

"Today," announced Snape happily, waving a hand to indicate the list of ingredients he had written up on the blackboard earlier, "we'll be learning one of the more basic Love Potions. It will be Valentine's Day soon, so pay attention to this - that includes you, Neville. And you as well, Ronald." He looked towards Ron with what seemed frighteningly like sympathy. "I hope you have not been having too much trouble catching up the work you missed?"

"Um... no trouble," Ron managed to answer, looking very unsure of himself. It was true that Ron was progressing quite well through the work he had missed during his time in the hospital wing, thanks to Harry and Hermione's help, but being on the receiving end of a seemingly compassionate Professor Snape was no doubt unnerving for him.

Snape beamed at this good news. "Delighted to hear it. If you need any help with your Potions; you know where to find me. Drop by any time."

Hermione had to admit at this point that Ron was not the only one present who was unnerved by this drastic turnaround in Snape's behaviour. She shook her head in a futile attempt to clear her thoughts. *Heaven only knows even I'm starting to become worried.*

"What in the name of all the nether hells is wrong with you?!" exclaimed Pansy Parkinson, who had risen to her feet and was openly gaping at her head of house. Apparently she was in denial and thus not thinking all too clearly, otherwise she would have known better than to ask that question out loud and in such a tone of voice.

"Twenty points from Slytherin!!" Snape bellowed, his face contorting around his ever-present smile into something that vaguely approached a scowl. It was the kind of look that might give a weakhearted sparrow pause, but otherwise did nothing to intimidate anyone, except Pansy who seemed to enter a state of shock at having points deducted from Slytherin by Snape.

"He just took points away from Slytherin," Harry said in disbelief.

"I think I know why it's so cold outside," whispered Ron, leaning across Hermione so that Harry could also hear.

Hermione, who was watching Snape in horrified fascination, asked distractedly, "Oh?"

Ron nodded and said, "Yeah. Hell just froze over."

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Lunch that first day of term proved to be, if nothing else, just as entertaining for the students as breakfast had. They entered the Great Hall after their morning classes to find that, for the second time that day, the regular menu had been substituted for something... rather more interesting.

The meal progressed with reasonable normality but for the forks at the Slytherin table; which would intermittently pull free from the grasp of whomever was using them and rise up into the air. There they would pause for a moment, gently bobbing up and down, before diving down upon their victim with loud and high-pitched cries of "Banzai!"

Then there was the fact that whenever one of the Ravensclaws touched a salt or pepper shaker the entire house would begin to sneeze in perfect unison. This would not have been too much of a problem for the academic Ravensclaws, but for the fact that their table had been charmed so that everyone sitting at

it would compulsively reach for either the salt or the pepper.

It was the Hufflepuff table, which had most obviously been attended to. Whoever was responsible had clearly noted the fascination with which the Hufflepuffs had toyed with the cocktail umbrellas that had been decorating the Pina Coladas that morning. Hence they dined under the shade of two dozen yellow and black striped umbrellas, which granted the table a decidedly outdoors feeling.

Not even the Gryffindors had been spared, finding themselves unable to acquire anything to drink other than coffee and mint-flavoured tea. It was this that brought Ron and Hermione's attention to Ginny and Harry, who respectively favoured those drinks over all others. Were it not for the obviously exasperated, but still slightly bemused, expressions on their faces Ron would have thought them to be the pranksters.

"Well, at least we know it wasn't Fred and George now," said Ron, fixing a square of bread to his fork before reaching for the nearest bubbling pot of melted cheese. Similar to what had happened at breakfast, the food at the table had been specifically limited. Instead of pizzas, however, this time the only thing available to eat was a staggering variety of fondues.

"How d'you reckon that?" asked Harry, trying not to leave a trail as he withdrew his fork from a pot of what looked like mushroom sauce.

Ron dipped his bread into the cheese as he answered, "They definitely weren't here this morning, so they wouldn't have known the Hufflepuffs would take such a liking to the umbrellas in those Pine Colognes we had this morning."

Hermione casually corrected him, "Pina Coladas."

Harry turned to Hermione and asked, "Are those actually supposed to have umbrellas?"

"I don't know," replied Hermione quickly, a faint blush rising to her cheeks.

"BANZAI!!!"

"AAAAHH!!!"

The loud yell from the direction of the Slytherin table distracted the Gryffindors as they turned to see Pansy Parkinson attempting to flee the hall. Apparently she had done something to annoy the forks, leading them to arrayed themselves in squadrons and take turns dive bombing her. As Pansy ran, ducking and weaving from the Great Hall, Ron could not help but feel a slight pang in his heart.

Four months of lying comatose in the hospital wing had caused repercussions for Ron beyond simply falling behind in his studies. All through his body, Ron's muscles had atrophied from lack of use, leaving the young man considerably weaker than he had been before the accident. Even with the aid of magic spells and potions, Ron still had a great deal of work ahead of him before he could reclaim the fitness he had once so easily taken for granted.

Chewing thoughtfully on the cheese-covered square of bread, Ron shook his head, as he always did when he found himself growing introspective. It was, he noticed, an occurrence that seemed to have increased as of late - apparently a side effect of his injury.

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Since awakening on Christmas day Ron had found himself spending far more time questioning things he ordinarily would never have given a second thought. He was learning a great many things, not only about the schoolwork he had missed, but about himself. Though he had yet to discuss it with anyone other than Hermione --who had almost refused to let him out of her sight during the first week after his awakening-- Ron was beginning to discover that he was a far more complex person than he had originally thought himself to be.

Talking it over with Hermione during one of their nightly catch-up study sessions, one where Harry and Ginny had not been present, he had come to realize that the stereotypical behaviour he had fallen into was merely a lone facet of his personality. Apparently, to his chagrin upon hearing it, this was old news to his girlfriend and his best friend, who appeared to know Ron Weasley better than he did himself.

Pulling himself out of this short excursion into self-discovery, Ron resumed to mull over his unfortunate state of fitness. While Madam Pomfrey was supplementing his diet with a staggering arrangement of potions designed to help him along, as well as regular practices with Harry and Ginny, it would be at least a month before Ron could resume his place on the Gryffindor Quidditch team. Essentially he was going to miss their next match, against Ravenclaw, and only be able to play in the final game of the season, against Hufflepuff.

Of course, he thought while glancing at Hermione, who cradled her right arm close to her side as she stretched to reach a pot that was just out of reach, *I don't really have that much cause to complain.*

Hermione was hurt far worse than I was.

"I think she fancies one of them," he said unexpectedly.

Ginny looked at him with a nonplussed expression. This was another side effect of Ron's injury; that his train of thought would often switch tracks with mercurial rapidity, frequently leaving those in his presence with complete incomprehension as to what he would now be talking about. His sister blinked several times before asking, "What? What on earth are you talking about? Who fancies who?"

Harry asked suspiciously, "You're not talking about Pansy, are you?"

"Of course not!"

"Then who?" prompted his best friend, looking from Hermione to Ginny and back.

"Don't look at me," said Hermione, holding up her right hand in denial. She shook her head and waved the fork she was holding in her left hand, jokingly saying, "I seldom have any idea what he's talking about."

Ron stifled a growl of frustration and elaborated, "Zabini."

Hermione blinked in surprise and asked, "What about her?"

"I told you - I think she fancies one of them."

"Who? Who's them?" asked Ginny.

"Fred and George!" exclaimed Ron, as if it were perfectly obvious.

"Oh, of course," said Harry, sounding as though it were perfectly obvious. He then dashed Ron's hopes of having an ally in this conversation by sarcastically adding, "How quickly I have lost the thread of this tapestry of intrigue."

"This is serious," Ron insisted, frowning at their cavalier reaction to the topic. He motioned at the table on the other side of the hall, where the object of their discussion was wrestling with a fork in an attempt to eat something. "A Slytherin might have a secret crush on one of my brothers!"

"Oh, it's no secret..." Ginny realized her mistake immediately when Ron's head snapped towards where she was sitting next to Harry. Trying not to wince she admitted, "Except from you."

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Ron could feel his eyes almost bugging out of his head as he stared at Ginny in disbelief that almost match that which he had experienced during this morning's Potions class. He looked from her to Harry and then Hermione, seeing that slightly guilty expressions coloured their faces as they studiously attempted to continue eating.

He looked narrowly at his companions and asked, "How long has this been going on for? How long have you know about it?"

"Since you woke up," admitted Ginny.

"Yes," agreed Hermione uncomfortably, "we suspected something was up when she turned the twins pink and started flirting with them."

"Actually it was Professor Hilary that mentioned it first," Harry pointed out.

Ron blinked several times, amazed by the fact that he had somehow managed to miss seeing this development. After a moment of self-reproach he asked, "But why are you lot simply sitting around and doing nothing?"

"There may be nothing we can do," Hermione told him in that calm voice she brought to the fore whenever she was anticipating a fight with him. "Like it or not this isn't something you can fix and forget."

"I get it, I get it," Ron responded quickly, intent on forestalling any argument between him and his girlfriend before it could develop. With a sigh he also found himself admitting, "In any case, I realize that most of my prior attempts to 'fix' things usually did more damage than leaving them be."

This admission raised the eyebrows of all three of his companions. Ginny shook her head slightly in amazement and said, "That's a rather... perceptive realization for you, Ron. I'm impressed. I daresay all three of us are."

"Thank you," he sighed. Realizing that this was yet another battle he would not be winning --he had experience in these lost causes-- Ron sighed again and propped an elbow on the table so that he could support his chin in his palm.

Ron looked past Harry and Ginny, sitting opposite him, and saw that Zabini had abandoned her efforts in controlling her fork, moving to the Ravenclaw table and her friends Padma Patil and Terry Boot, apparently preferring to join them in their sneezing rather than fight for her meal. He stifled the urge to sigh yet again and muttered, "I just know this is going to end badly for me."

Harry waved his concerns away. "Relax, Ron. Don't worry about it. After all, what could possibly go wrong?"

"Shall I record that under, 'famous last words'?" Ron asked dryly.

"I'd never have believed that I could actually enjoy a Potions class," admitted Ginny during dinner later that day. As she heartily dug into her steaming helping of spaghetti and meatballs she continued, "If anybody had told me that yesterday I'd have personally escorted them to St. Mungo's for therapy." "Hilarious, wasn't it?" asked Harry as he twirled some spaghetti around his fork which, thankfully, had not attempted to dive bomb anyone during the course of the meal.

Ginny giggled and nodded. "Even better than you described. Although I think whatever it was that caused his... condition is beginning to wear off. He actually managed to scowl once or twice by the end of the lesson."

Ron, who was sitting opposite her, sighed wistfully and prodded his spaghetti. "Pity."

"Yeah," agreed Harry, nodding unhappily. Stabbing a meatball with his fork he told them, "We'll need to find something else to liven things up for us around here."

"No, thank you," declared Hermione, sprinkling some mozzarella over her spaghetti. "I think Hogwarts has been lively enough over the past few months without you adding to it."

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A sly expression settled across Harry's face and Ginny immediately began to feel apprehensive at the sight of it. Harry would always develop this look on his face when he came up with a plan that he thought was very clever. Ginny had seen it many times, not only in both private and social settings, but also on a few rare occasions when Harry was forced into a confrontation. It usually meant that he was about to spring an exceptionally unpleasant surprise upon whichever unsuspecting victim dared to challenge him.

What's going through that evil mind of yours? she asked worriedly.

~Hey! My mind is not evil!~ protested Harry. *~Not entirely anyway.~* He paused and considered for a moment before grinning wickedly and saying, "I've just had a wonderfully innovative idea that promises to liven up tonight's grand re-opening quite impressively."

"Oh no," Ginny managed to groan before Harry grabbed her by the wrist and pulled her to her feet,

dragging her in the direction of the staff table.

Harry, Ginny asked silently, nervousness blossoming within her, *what are you doing?*

~Trust me on this, Ginny~ he responded, *~Have I ever led you wrong?~*

"Frequently," she muttered under her breath as Harry pulled her to where Professor Dumbledore was eating his own spaghetti, which was covered by a small mountain of meatballs, tomatoes, mushrooms and cheese. The elderly wizard smiled as the two students stood before him, his eyebrows raised in question as he looked from Ginny to Harry.

"Headmaster," Harry said in greeting, "I just wanted to inform you that there's been a slight change in tonight's program."

Dumbledore paused in the consumption of his spaghetti --which was the sole item of food available for dinner-- looked on curiously and asked, "You're not thinking of cancelling are you, Harry?"

Harry shook his head, "Of course not. Everything will go just as planned, with the exception that I won't be the one taking the class."

Harry no!! protested Ginny, a sinking feeling settling in her stomach.

"I now intend not only to introduce Ginny as my assistant in class," continued Harry, "but to also let her be tonight's instructor."

"I see," observed Dumbledore, his blue eyes sparkling merrily as he regarded the look of growing alarm spreading across Ginny's face. The headmaster visibly stifled a grin, but Ginny saw his moustache twitching with amusement as he turned to her and said, "In that case, Virginia, since this effectively makes you a member of Hogwarts' staff, please feel free to call me Albus from now on."

Ginny struggled not to gape at Dumbledore, her mind awash with thoughts that were not meshing together in any coherent fashion. One part of her was honoured that the headmaster considered her enough of an equal to ask that she address him as one. Another part was horrified that Dumbledore was apparently willing to follow Harry's lead and allow Ginny to actually teach students rather than simply act as Harry's assistant.

One large part of Ginny was contemplating Harry's demise for doing something like this to her. She turned from Dumbledore and glared at her boyfriend in a manner she had learnt over the years from her mother. Harry, however, refused to flinch even as Ginny put her hands on her hips and huffed angrily at him.

Then Ginny made the mistake of looking into his eyes, something that invariably prevented her from remaining even slightly annoyed with him for very long. In that moment, seeing the teasing sparkle of mischief in those incredibly bright green eyes, Ginny felt the largest part of herself come forward and without thinking about it her mouth curled into a small grin of understanding.

"You realize, of course," she told him in the cultivated bone-dry tone that let him know she was returning the tease, "that now I'll have to kill you."

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The news spread throughout the school faster than a Firebolt in a steep dive. Harry could guess that Ginny had told Hermione, who in turn had informed Parvati and Lavender, who had then taken it upon themselves to let everyone else in on what was supposed to be the final surprise for the day. How they had accomplished this in less than half an hour was one of those mysteries that would likely never be solved.

Entering the Practical Fighting Techniques auditorium, which resided under the room that had housed a giant-sized three-headed dog several years before, Harry found himself the centre of a great deal more attention than was usual. Most of the students had arrived early, eager to find those seats which would provide the best view. As he made his way down the shallow stairs leading to the centre stage, Harry could hear the low whispers and quiet betting that always seemed to be produced when he and Ginny went out onto the stage together.

Sounds like the betting is pretty even, Harry, remarked Osiris as Harry walked past the section of seats claimed by the Gryffindor students.

Quite so, agreed Heracles, **It seems that you are no longer the default favourite to win.**

I'm sure Ginny's delighted to hear that, replied Harry.

Standing by the desk, set to one side of the stage, Ginny grinned impishly as he caught her eye and told him, *~Definitely. I hear Moira's bet five Galleons on me laying you on your arse in less than five minutes.~*

"Potter."

Harry stopped and turned to find Blaise Zabini, who stepped close to him and said in a low voice, "I've bet a lot of Galleons that you'll be the one to win this."

He raised his eyebrows and asked, "And if I don't?"

"I will be... annoyed," Zabini told him succinctly, before turning on a heel and marching to where the few Slytherins that were present were seated.

~For someone with aspirations of becoming my sister-in-law~ Ginny noted wryly, having overheard the conversation while moving from Harry's desk to centre stage, *~she should know better.~*

We don't know that she wants to marry either of the twins, Harry admonished her as he strode out onto the stage, taking up a place just behind and to the right of Ginny.

"Good evening," Ginny announced. Harry looked out over the crowd, noting that almost every Auror that was not on duty had made a point of attending the class. Unlike the students and professors, he guessed that they were present just as a precaution in the event anything untoward should occur. Even so, he noted that several of the younger Aurors appeared to be exchanging bets in much the same manner as the students.

"We'll be starting off," Ginny was saying as she slowly moved away from Harry, "with a short demonstration of unarmed combat between myself and my boyfriend. After I've successfully knocked Harry off his feet and onto his arse, we'll proceed --providing Harry's still conscious-- with short personal evaluations of various students in order to assess your levels of ability."

Harry, deciding to ignore her confident remark about knocking him onto his posterior, smiled cheekily and bestowed an overstated bow to Ginny. Giving Harry a smirk that was both playful and dangerous at the same time Ginny adopted a basic ready stance and asked, "No holds barred, lover?"

"No holds barred," Harry confirmed, silently wondering if any medical insurance --for the most part a Muggle concept-- covered being beaten to death by one's girlfriend.

A second later, Harry was silently wondering when Ginny had become so proficient in martial arts.

She exploded towards him even before he had finished speaking, raining in rapid combinations of hand and foot strikes. Harry was immediately on the defensive, retreating and countering the flurry of blows as best he could, which was not easy considering the rapidity with which Ginny was launching her attacks.

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Ginny quickly backed Harry to the edge of the auditorium's stage and seemed to be only moments away from knocking him clean out of the arena. She came at him with the fury of a thunderstorm unleashed; every kick and punch cracking through the air like lightning. Harry stood firm against the onslaught, but it was a considerable effort, requiring him to bring every ounce of his speed and strength to the fore.

Aye, lad, commented Loki in a bemused tone, **You seem to have worked yourself into a corner this time.**

You think?

Harry was reacting to Ginny's attacks on an almost instinctual level, his concentration focused more on the task of analyzing her actions and determining the strategy he needed to end their contest. Since Ginny's ire was mostly his own fault, Harry quickly dismissed any idea of using his superior size and strength, realizing that this would only serve to fuel Ginny's temper.

In that instant Ginny sent an inside knife hand strike arcing in from the left, aimed at Harry's collarbone. Ordinarily Harry would have blocked or deflected the strike, but this time he overrode his reflexive response and instead tried something completely unexpected.

He lowered his arms, which he had been holding up to protect his head, and took a short step backwards. Ginny's right hand swished past him, missing by only a matter of an inch or two, but leaving the young witch momentarily exposed. Before she could pull back Harry's hands snapped out and clamped around Ginny's wrist. Pivoting on his heel Harry heaved and sent his girlfriend flying. Ginny sailed through the air, heading for a hard landing on her back, but somehow managed to flip herself over. With her head tucked close to her chest and her arms and legs pulled tight against her body, Ginny deftly righted her body and uncoiled to alight nimbly on her feet, her bright brown eyes fixed on Harry as her lips curved into a wry smile.

"Damn," she said as she straightened, "for a minute there I thought I might just beat you for once."

"You're getting better," Harry acknowledged walking over to her. As he approached Harry reached up to rub at the corner of his mouth where a trickle of blood was oozing out. This was the result of the only blow Ginny had managed to land, quite early in the fight too. "You almost took my head off once or twice."

"It's just a scratch. Nothing serious," Ginny answered playfully, reaching up to tenderly dab away the spot of red.

Harry arched an eyebrow at her and observed, "It was awfully close though. What if you'd really injured me?"

Ginny effected an innocent look and asked, "What makes you think I wasn't trying?"

And you were saying something about my being evil? he asked with a broad grin. Turning to face the body of students and observing professors and Aurors, who were applauding the display, Harry asked out loud, "So, ready to begin the evaluations?"

"Naturally," she said with a brisk nod, "now that we're warmed up."

"Who d'you want to start with then?" he asked.

Harry watched with mounting amusement as Ginny's eyes tracked over the waiting students, who had abruptly fallen silent. He tried to stifle the smile when Ginny fixed her eyes upon the still form of Blaise Zabini, whose own smile abruptly faded upon realising that she was about to "volunteer" to be first up for evaluation.

"It's come to our attention that there has been some... friendly wagering as to which of the two of us here would win our little sparring contest.," Ginny began, keeping her eyes locked on Zabini. She arched one auburn eyebrow almost to her hairline and noted, "It has also come to *my* attention that certain people who should know better decided to bet against me."

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Blaise swallowed nervously and, without another word on Ginny's part, rose from her seat and stepped out onto the stage. As she passed by Harry she shot him a glare so cold he thought his fingers would get frostbite, clearly under the assumption that he had informed Ginny of which side she had chosen. Shrugging apologetically, since he had in a way been the reason Ginny knew, Harry watched as Zabini settled opposite Ginny.

"Let's get this over with," Blaise replied, wagging her fists in Ginny's direction in poor imitation of a boxer. "And try not to kill me."

Yes, Harry thought with a smile, *life at Hogwarts is returning to normal.*

"That wasn't so hard now, was it?"

Hilary Proteus favoured her husband with a sardonic look, as they slowly made their way back to their quarters from the Practical Fighting Techniques auditorium. Reluctantly she gave a slight nod and admitted, "Not from this angle, no."

Gregory only shrugged. "I suppose teaching your first class is a bit stressful."

"Stressful?" repeated Hilary, staring at him with wide hazel eyes. She quickly collected herself and then remarked, "I remember you being as cool as a cucumber the first time you taught."

"Actually," Gregory admitted in a bashful tone, "the first thought on my mind at the time was 'I'm doomed'."

"It didn't show," Hilary stated with authority. "In fact, you managed to scare most of us half to death."

Gregory grinned wolfishly at her, "At least I got everyone's attention."

Hilary's next retort died in her throat as she spied someone approaching them from over Gregory's shoulder. Gregory, seeing her gaze, turned and visibly tensed at the sight of Professor Snape walking swiftly down the corridor towards them. Both husband and wife, though they would never admit it, were impressed by the sheer vehemence that radiated off the black robed man. He was practically oozing accidental magic as he approached them, not really walking so much as stalking in a predatory manner.

"Proteus," he bit out as he came to a halt before them. He shot first Gregory and then Hilary a fiery look that threatened to induce spontaneous combustion in the two Defence professors. Both teachers simply raised their eyebrows and met his glare with expressions of polite curiosity, obviously made of sterner stuff than anyone else, who would have been trying their best to escape the Potions Master's presence.

"Severus," acknowledged Gregory courteously. The faintest traces of a smile reached his lips as he noted innocently, "I see you're feeling better."

"Indeed," intoned Snape with a remarkable amount of cutting inflection placed on that single word, clearly informing the pair that he knew who was responsible for his lapse in behaviour during the day. His black eyes flicked from one Proteus to the other, narrowing fractionally as he continued, "As a matter of fact I wished to inform you *personally* that I am now fully recovered from my... distraction and shall be resuming my lessons tomorrow in my usual manner."

Hilary managed not to wince in sympathy for those students who had Potions the following day. "I'm sure the students will be delighted to have you back to your old self," she said diplomatically.

"No," Snape said, just before he left. "They most certainly will not."

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18. Discussions of Trust

Ginny, with barely a handful of seconds to spare, rushed into the Gryffindor Quidditch team's changing room. She skidded to an abrupt halt, almost toppling over as she did so, coming to a rest just short of colliding with the five members of the team that were already present.

The two Beaters; Seamus Finnigan and Moira Mackay, who were sitting on a wooden bench along one wall watched her entrance with looks of supreme amusement. Gareth Harriet and Jefferson Hope, her fellow Chasers, were obviously relieved by her timely arrival. Harry, the team's Captain and Seeker, scarcely reacted beyond a slight warming of his bright green eyes. His demeanour always took on a serious aspect when Quidditch was involved, though he admittedly could not refrain from granting his girlfriend a little leeway.

"Ginny," he greeted her once she had managed to catch her breath. He looked expectantly over her shoulder and asked, "Where's Carmen?"

"She overslept a bit, Harry," Ginny offered, pausing as she remembered how difficult her friend had been to rouse that morning. Then, in the silence, the sound of feet pounding rapidly reached their ears, causing Ginny to smile with relief. She met Harry's eyes and could see the amusement colouring them, despite his stern visage. "Here she comes now."

Harry nodded as Carmen rushed into the change room, much as Ginny had only moments before only looking a trifle damp, and crashed into Ginny's back sending both girls toppling to the floor. With a muffled curse and a feeling of her cheeks blushing a warm pink, Ginny tried to extract herself from her friend's tangled limbs, looking up as she did so to see Harry standing over both of them.

"At least you're both eager," he noted drolly, offering a helping hand.

"Sorry," apologised Carmen meekly, stumbling to her feet as Harry lifted Ginny up. She repeated the excuse Ginny had give earlier, "I overslept."

Harry looked at Ginny with raised eyebrows. Carmen hardly ever overslept and had never been late for a single early morning Quidditch practice, so this admission was an unusual one. However, she was also a notoriously deep sleeper, to the point of being capable of missing a small war going on around her.

~How'd you manage to wake her up?~

I used the method Fred and George employ on Ron when he oversleeps, she replied, grinning as they joined the rest of the team by the benches.

Harry laughed. "You dumped a bucket of water on her."

Ginny nodded. "It certainly woke her up in a flash."

"Don't you mean, 'in a splash', mon?" asked Gareth cheekily.

The rest of the team groaned, some of them covering their eyes in despair. Gareth, the shaven-headed son of the Jamaican Ministry of Magic's ambassador, was famous amongst the Gryffindors for coming

up with slews of bad puns. Carmen, who still had a faint blush in her cheeks, shook her head. "That was awful, Gar," she told him, dropping down next to Seamus and Moira. Gareth smirked at her and pointed out. "Maybe. But better than having actually being woken up in a splash."

"People, if today's Vaudeville routine is finished, could we please get back to the matter at hand?" asked Harry, standing imperiously in front of his team.

"Right, Skipper," chorused Carmen and Gareth, immediately settling down.

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Ginny took her customary seat between Jefferson Hope and Moira, watching with amusement as Harry began to pace. He moved back and forth for a minute, looking deep in thought, before drawing to a halt and facing them with a serious expression.

"Okay, men," he began.

"An' women," interrupted Moira, crossing her arms and glaring at him.

"And women," agreed Harry with a nod. "This is it."

Ginny immediately spoke up, mimicking his tone of voice perfectly. "The big one. The one we've all been waiting for." When Harry scowled at her she simply shrugged her shoulders and explained, "Fred and George told me all about Wood's speeches. The two of them even memorized all of them."

~Apparently so have you~ he retorted with a smile. He looked at the rest of the team, who were watching with broad grin. Nodding briskly he said, "All right, let's just go out and show anyone that cares to watch exactly how Quidditch is played."

Winter's hold on the highlands appeared to have finally been broken, and the arrival of spring seemed to be imminent. Only a faint breeze disturbed the air, rustling Dumbledore's long hair as he settled in his seat to watch the first Quidditch match of the new year. A soft cry overhead drew the headmaster's attention to the clear azure sky, where a pair of peregines circled high above the stadium.

Though Dumbledore was not necessarily a superstitious man, not difficult considering he knew Professor Trelawney, he did momentarily find himself wondering if this was not perhaps a portent concerning the outcome of the game which would be starting shortly. Professor Flitwick, the head of Ravenclaw house, certainly seemed to think so.

"Ah, a good sign that," the diminutive wizard declared, following Dumbledore's gaze.

"Forgive me, Filius, if I rather hope not," Dumbledore replied with a smile. His longstanding loyalty to Gryffindor --which had been his house as a student many years ago-- often came to the fore during Quidditch.

They were interrupted by the arrival of Severus Snape, who appeared in the teachers' box with his customary swish of black robes. It was immediately obvious to everyone, not just Dumbledore, that Snape was gnashing his teeth for some reason. As the Potions Master sank into his seat alongside Dumbledore, the reason for his ire appeared in the forms of the Defence professors, Gregory and Hilary Proteus.

Snape clearly did not appreciate it when the husband and wife pair moved to the seats behind him, though being in the company of the headmaster prevented him from tearing the couple limb from limb. It was close though.

"Ready to fulfil your part of the bargain, Severus?" asked Gregory, dressed from head to toe in clothes of every possible shade of red.

"You should never bet when you know you're going to lose," added Hilary, dressed far more sedately, but looking far more animated than her flamboyant husband.

Dumbledore swore he could hear Snape's teeth grinding.

Gregory repeated, "Remember our deal, Severus. It was a binding magical contract."

"Yes, of course," agreed the Potions Master. Dumbledore thought it likely that he would have been able to roast marshmallows, a Muggle sweet the headmaster was rather fond of, under the burning gaze Snape was directing at the two Defence Professors. Visibly gathering himself, Snape turned his attention back to the game that was about to begin and, with a resigned air, raised one fist into the air and began to cheer in a toneless voice.

"Go Gryffindor. Go Potter. Yay."

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"And first onto the field is the Ravenclaw team," announced the amplified voice of Blaise Zabini, the game commentator. "Led by Captain and Seeker, Cho Chang," she continued. "Ravenclaw is tipped as a possible winner of this year's Quidditch Cup, thanks in no small part to their devastating victories over Hufflepuff and Slytherin last term..."

Hermione listened to Blaise's commentary with only half an ear, focusing her attention on one particular redhead who was sitting by her side. Ever since he had finally awoke from his coma, Hermione had been keeping a close eye on Ron, some irrational part of her afraid he might disappear into thin air and leave her.

At the moment Ron was gazing around the Quidditch stadium with childish abandon, a pair of stylish sunglasses shading his eyes from the bright spring sun. He turned his head to where the Ravenclaw team was marching onto the field, reaching up to tap the single brass button that adorned the eyewear three times, thus activating the pair of Omnitacles' special functions.

"Fred and George are going to make a killing with these," he declared happily, clearly delighted by this gift which his brothers had presented him with earlier.

Harry had handed over several working Omnitacles and complete instructions on their assembly to his

business partners at Christmas. Fred and George had been indescribably delighted, their enthusiasm for the new invention overshadowed only by Ron's blessed emergence from his coma and the fact that Blaise Zabini had turned them pink for three days.

Ron continued to enthuse on the sunglasses, "I can't believe Harry managed to think this up all by himself. It must have taken him ages to work it all out.

"According to Ginny," Hermione told him, "he spent most of the summer on them."

"Brilliant idea," agreed Dennis Creevey, who was sitting on Ron's other side and had overheard their discussion. He had purchased a pair of the new Omnitacles himself and was reading through the rather thick user's manual Hermione had insisted the twins include with every purchase.

His older brother Colin was next to Dennis, his trusty camera in one hand and a large box of popcorn in the other. Hermione wondered briefly where he had obtained the Muggle treat, when he leaned over Dennis and offered, "Popcorn anyone?"

"You don't have to ask me twice," Ron said eagerly, apparently drawn to the delicious aroma wafting out of the colourfully decorated box. He reached in to grab some of the little white puffs.

"Actually, Ron," Hermione observed wryly as her boyfriend stuffed the handful of popcorn in his mouth, "we very seldom have to ask you the first time."

Ron grinned at her while munching noisily, his blue eyes sparkling merrily over the frame of the sunglasses, which he had perched on the tip of his long nose. Elbowing her lightly in the ribs, Ron rubbed his leg against her in playful manner, before slipping an arm around her shoulders and gently pulling her to his side.

Hermione cuddled close to him, nuzzling her head into the crook of his shoulder. "Mmm, this is nice," she murmured, "I think I could stay like this with you forever."

"I like that idea," agreed Ron.

She wiggled in his embrace, enjoying the feeling of closeness it provided. Still, she could not suppress a small shudder from running through her. So much had changed, particularly for Hermione, during the time Ron had been sleeping. It worried her sometimes, more often than she would likely admit, but she was unsure how to address the issue with her boyfriend.

Ron was not, by nature, a calm person and Hermione did not think herself capable of handling one of his legendary tirades. Not after having been on such an emotional rollercoaster ride for the past five months. It he started yelling at her for whatever reason...

"What's wrong?" Ron asked unexpectedly, pushing his Omnitacles up so that they were perched on top of his head as he looked at her with clear concern.

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Startled, both by the unexpected question and Ron's equally unexpected awareness of her subtle change in mood, Hermione glanced up at him. Swallowing nervously she said, "Nothing."

Ron frowned and shook his head. "I'm not buying it. I can feel it, something is bothering you. Now spill it."

"I'm sorry, Ron," Hermione said, ducking her head with a mounting feeling of shame. "I shouldn't have tried to avoid talking about it for so long."

"Talk about what?" Ron asked, clearly puzzled.

Hermione closed her eyes and whispered, "I'm afraid."

Ron blinked with what felt like total consternation. He was not sure what he had been expecting Hermione to say, but this surprise admission was certainly not it.

"Afraid of what?" he asked. An uncomfortable feeling suddenly began to grow in the pit of his stomach, causing Ron to hesitate and ask uncertainly, "Is it me?"

"No," Hermione whispered again, shaking her head. Watching closely Ron noticed, as she pulled away from him, that she was unconsciously stroking her injured right arm. He had a sudden suspicion as to what was causing this unease in his girlfriend.

"Hermione," he said tenderly, allowing her to withdraw more fully from him so that she did not feel crowded. He very much wanted to hold her in his arms, but found himself thinking that, at the moment, she needed the space. "Nothing that's happened has changed you in any way. You're still the same person you've always been."

Again Hermione shook her head, slightly more firmly this time, and choked out, "No, I'm not. I can barely cast a spell with my right hand anymore and, even with Harry and Ginny's help, I'm not much better with my left."

Ron shook his head in amazement at how Hermione was downplaying her, frankly, amazing progress under Harry and Ginny's tuition. Admittedly she was not yet at the level she had once been, but she had made a remarkable amount of improvement.

"So this scares you?" he asked, trying to understand her reasoning.

"No..." Hermione admitted, dropping her chin to her chest and staring at the floor in despair. "I'm scared that... that you can't love me like this. Because I'm broken."

Ron's breath caught in his throat as he looked at his girlfriend in dismay. To his complete amazement, and he struggled against it, Ron could feel the prickle of tears stinging the back of his eyes.

He reached out to grab Hermione by her arm, making sure to grip her stronger left arm. With all the sincerity he could muster he told her, "Mione, you're not 'broken', not in any way that counts."

Until this moment Ron had not truly understood how difficult Hermione was finding her current condition, but now he felt the comprehension blossoming within him. He realized suddenly how very fragile his girlfriend must have been feeling, regardless of how much of a stiff upper lip she presented to the world at all times.

Seeing that Hermione was shaking her head and refusing to lift her eyes to meet his, Ron released her arm and reached up to cup her chin. Gently he lifted her head up so that he could look into her face, distressed at the sight of glistening tears on her cheeks.

Using his thumbs Ron lovingly rubbed away the damp streaks and tilted Hermione's head until her eyes met his. She looked at him uncertainly, as if unconvinced that Ron was being truthful. He smiled supportively at her, seeing the fear and uncertainty in her glistening eyes. Inspiration struck him then, as it often did when he found himself gazing at Hermione.

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"I was in a coma for four months, 'Mione," he told her, trying to get his point across in a different manner. "It's been nearly a month since I woke up and I'm still not back to how I was. Even if I was physically fit, I'm still different here," he tapped at his temple. "I think and react differently from how I used to before I was hurt. Chances are, I'll be like this for the rest of our lives. I'm also different, also damaged, also '*broken*' in a way... does that mean you'll stop loving me?"

Hermione looked at him with startled eyes. "I will never stop loving you, Ron," she told him in her best authoritative voice.

He smiled and caressed her cheek. "And I'll never stop loving you."

She was silent for a long time, considering his words as she looked at her hands which were resting on her lap. Finally she looked up at him, a pensive expression replacing the vulnerable one, and said,

"You *have* changed. You never spoke to me, or Harry, like this before."

"No, I probably wouldn't have - at least not as calmly," he agreed readily. He slipped his hands from her face and picked up her hands, holding them up between them. "I've never been much for introspection, Hermione. I'm usually the one that jumps in without checking the water level, if Harry doesn't beat me to it. But being in a coma for so long... it forced me to examine my life; to try and understand why I do the things I do. It's been anything but easy getting used to the changes, but I think it's helped me become a better person--"

"Still as talkative as ever though," interrupted Hermione, rising out of her seat to engulf Ron in a fierce hug. She pulled him close to her and whispered in his ear, her soft voice thick with emotion, "Thank you, Ron."

Ron was blushing furiously by the time she released him, terribly aware that quite a few pairs of Gryffindor eyes were watching curiously. He glared at Hermione. "Not a problem, but when did you become such an advocate of public displays of affection?"

"Ever since I discovered it embarrasses you," Hermione responded with a grin.

Hermione was obviously trying not to laugh at the expression which crossed his face, despite Ron's best efforts to conceal it.

Ginny watched with alarm as Seamus superimposed himself between Harry and an onrushing Bludger, shielding their Captain and Seeker with his very body. Harry, seemingly oblivious to the danger, continued his dive for the Golden Snitch. Only Ginny was aware that the Gryffindor Seeker was silently cursing at Seamus for being a "damn fool martyr".

Harry had no problem with either of the team's Beaters putting their bodies on the line for one of their team-mates, unless it was him that they were protecting. It was not that Harry did not appreciate the gesture. It was simply that he was, and always would be, more concerned about the safety and wellbeing of others than he was himself. This was especially true since, while he did not actively court trouble, it had the uncanny ability of find him regardless of the situation.

Then, in that moment, everything seemed to happen at once.

Harry swooped down on a collision course with the pitch, his robes whipping about in the wind of his acceleration. Both hands firmly grasped the handle of his Firebolt, keeping the sensitive broom steady and on course.

The jet black Bludger rammed into Seamus' side with a dull thump, knocking the young Irish wizard clear off his broom. He seemed to hang suspended in midair for a timeless moment before falling to the ground.

Across the field, where she had until then been busy assaulting one of the Ravenclaw Chasers, Moira turned on her broom just in time to see her boyfriend drop from his broom. Her eyes grew wide as she took off towards him, even though she would never reach him in time.

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Cho Chang, having spotted the Snitch not long after Harry, pulled out of her own dive. There was no way her aging Comet Two Sixty could catch Harry's Firebolt, and she clearly had no desire to plough headfirst into the ground.

Dropping towards the pitch considerably faster than Seamus was, Harry released one hand from its position on the handle. His arm swung back in preparation to snap forward like a striking cobra when the Snitch was close enough.

Seamus, to whom it must have seemed as if the ground were rising up to meet him, twisted and turned as he fell. It looked about as graceful as an anvil dropped from the Astronomy Tower, and did nothing to slow his descent.

The Ravenclaw Chasers took advantage of the Gryffindor team's distraction. Padma Patil had just been handed the Quaffle from Ellie Sattler, the Chaser Moira had been harassing, and passed it to Tim Murphy, who slipped the red ball through a hoop.

Carmen, who had been watching Seamus plummet, bit off a curse when she realised that she had allowed the Ravenclaws to score a goal. This brought the points to sixty each, which meant that Gryffindor would have to beat Hufflepuff by a substantial margin to win the Cup this year.

Harry rolled out of his dive, so close that the grass on the pitch stained the scarlet of his robes, and reached out with his right hand. At the same time his righted himself from his low leaning position on the Firebolt, slowing the broom to a halt.

Not far from where Harry came to rest, the Snitch held high above his head in triumph, Seamus Finnigan crashed hard on the unforgiving surface of the pitch. Even from where she was hovering on her broom Ginny could hear a distinct snap.

Circling high above Madam Hooch raised her whistle to her lips and blew resoundingly, signalling the end of the match. On the opposite end of the field, in the commentator's box, Blaise Zabini was announcing that Harry had caught the Snitch and tallied up the final score.

It was end of what had been an exceptionally tough match.

Ginny, oddly enough, was the first to reach Seamus. Moira had almost collided with Jefferson as she barrelled to where Seamus landed and was forced to swerve and loop around. She was cursing loudly and yelling for Madam Pomfrey, Professor McGonagall, Harry, Ginny and even Merlin --should he ever prove available-- to rush to Seamus' side and help save his life.

This last bit seemed a bit premature to Ginny, who immediately saw that Seamus' life would only become threatened when Moira realized that he was going to be just fine. She carefully deposited her broom nearby and knelt beside her team-mate, who was struggling to sit himself up.

~Is he okay, Gin?~ Harry asked as he jogged over to them.

Ginny nodded her head, *He'll live. Though I don't know for how long once Moira gets hold of him.*

"That did not go according to plan," Seamus grunted as Ginny placed a steadying hand on his shoulder and helped him into an upright position. He was holding his left arm close to his chest and had to visibly bite off a cry of pain when Ginny took him by the wrist and extended the broken limb out. He winced as she shifted the arm for a better look and gasped, "I think it's broken."

Moira is not going to be happy, was the first thought that struck Ginny as she saw a ragged and bloody tear with a sharp edge of white bone protruding. Thanks to having been joined to the Order she had a reasonable knowledge of healing minor injuries such as this, so Ginny quickly went to work.

Fractured ulna from the look of it, diagnosed Miko softly.

From the look of it, concurred Heracles dryly.

It was Osiris that noted, **I'd say he's torn something in his wrist as well, a sprain at the very least.*

He must have tried to catch himself with that arm as he hit the ground.

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"Yeah, it's broken," Seamus muttered, mostly to himself, when he caught his first glimpse of the bleeding wound. The sight of the red and stark white seemed to make him queasy, for he began to sway uncertainly where he was sitting.

"This will probably hurt a little," Ginny warned him just as Harry and Moira reached them.

Seamus met her eyes, his own slightly glazed over in pain, "It already does."

Ginny gave him no warning and, with a practiced ease, snapped the bone back into place. The resounding click of it returning to its proper position seemed almost as loud as the initial break had. She looked up to see Seamus' face go white, as did Moira's, who was now kneeling on the swaying boy's other side.

"Omigod, Seamus," the third-year gasped, reaching out to grab hold of his unbroken arm's hand. She looked at the other, now blood-soaked, arm and asked, "Are yeh alri?"

Seamus looked at her incredulously and said, "Fine. Didn't hurt a bit. Ow."

Moira let her steel-grey eyes bored a hole into Seamus' head with a look that could inspire nightmares in someone faint of heart. It was not so much the look itself that accomplished this, but rather the implied threat of what *could* happen later if Moira's legendary temper was not mollified.

The sandy-haired boy gulped around his pain, "I guess you're pretty angry with me, huh?"

"'Angry' isnae th' waird uil b'usin'." Moira warned, her brogue much thicker than normal. The tone of her voice made Ginny rise to her feet and move to join Harry. The two watched the young witch with bemusement as she proceeded to harangue Seamus in vivid soundly Gaelic.

I have a feeling Seamus is never going to save your life like that again, Ginny noted as she slipped an arm around Harry's waist.

Harry shook his head and draped an arm over her shoulders, *~I don't doubt it, though it was hardly my life he was saving when he pulled that stunt.~*

****In either case,**** commented a dry voice, ****I certain that young Mister Finnigan will not have the slightest clue what hit him by the time that lass is through with him.****

Sirius watched silently as the Quidditch pitch slowly emptied of spectators and players, leaving him alone with his godson. The Gryffindors had departed the pitch after splitting almost equally, half moving to escort Seamus Finnigan to the hospital wing, and the other half heading back to their dormitories to celebrate their victory.

The last to leave had been Ginny, Hermione and Ron, who left in the company of Remus Lupin. Harry had remained, promising to join them after lunch. In the meanwhile he would be staying behind to speak with Sirius, who had asked Remus to convey the convict's desire to talk.

He and Remus had been busy in travelling from Paris, where they had just finished confirmed that Voldemort was gathering a force of vampires, to Dublin over the period of Christmas when Hogwarts had been attacked by... something. Sirius was still not very clear on what exactly had happened, but he did know one undisputed fact.

Harry had spoken, civilly at that, with Lucius Malfoy.

The first letter had been from Hermione, written in an unsteady and spidery scrawl that was a far cry

from her once meticulous script. Still, considering her had been entirely unable to write with her left hand her progress was truly remarkable.

The next letter had been from Ginny, sounding rather more concerned for Harry's wellbeing than Sirius had come to expect from the normally composed young witch. She had gone more into detail about Harry's battle with the shadow creatures Draco Malfoy had sent against them than Harry's encounter with Lucius, but there had been a mention of it.

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Dumbledore had also reported, via a note delivered by Fawkes, that Harry had apparently entered into some sort of deal with Malfoy (and by proxy Voldemort) though he did not go into any detail about what that deal entailed.

It had been, surprisingly enough, the last letter that spurred Sirius and his werewolf companion into making a brief stopover at Hogwarts before carrying on to Dublin. It had been a scathing and very insulting letter --insulting both Harry and Sirius, often in one sentence-- and had been written by none other than Severus Snape.

The fact that Snape felt a need to speak with Sirius about Harry was clearly an indication of the severity of the situation.

"Dammit, Harry!" Sirius all but roared as he changed back into his human form once Harry gave the all clear. He rounded on his godson with a furious expression. "What in Hell's bells d'you think you're doing, forming an alliance with Voldemort?! The thing that killed your parents!"

"Good to see you too, Sirius," greeted Harry sarcastically.

"This isn't time for jokes, Harry," Sirius snapped angrily.

"I wasn't aware I had made any," replied Harry with the strange calmness he had developed since being selected to join the Order of the Phoenix. A faint and displeased scowl marred his brow as he continued, "Nor have I formed an alliance with Voldemort. I will never do anything like that. Ever." Sirius took a deep, calming breath --which had little effect-- and asked, "Then what the devil are you playing at? A truce?"

Harry shook his head firmly. "No, not a truce either." He had begun to pace to and fro in front of Sirius, hands clasped together and resting by the small of his back. "At best, a temporary ceasefire. At worst, a trap waiting to be sprung."

"Then why'd you accept?" Sirius asked completely baffled.

"I simply don't see that we have any alternative. It's a choice between the lesser of two evils," Harry explained patiently. He stopped pacing and ran a hand through his hair. "Voldemort may be more dangerous in the long run, but Malfoy could kill us all long before then if he's not stopped."

"Draco's that dangerous?"

Harry grimaced unhappily. "Right now he makes Voldemort look like a squib."

Sirius blinked and, once the enormity of that statement sank in, swallowed. "That bad?"

"Probably worse," Harry sighed.

"I don't like it," asserted Sirius.

"No more than I or anyone else does," concurred Harry. He sighed again and almost nervously ran his hands through his hair and reluctantly admitted, "Still, there are one or two positive aspects about the situation."

Sirius arched a wry eyebrow. "I'm obviously very dense today, because I certainly can't see any."

Harry's response was simple and caught Sirius' attention fully. "Wormtail."

"What about him?" he asked, eyes narrowing in distaste and anger as his thoughts immediately drifted to his onetime friend.

"He's the condition I demanded before accepting Voldemort's proposal," Harry said blandly.

Sirius absorbed that for a moment. Then the true meaning of Harry's words hit him. Simply put, Sirius was rocked beyond words. He did not say anything because he could not bring his mind into focus as he just stared at Harry in disbelief. Finally he opened his mouth, a myriad questions suddenly filling his mind, but only managed to ask one - the first that occurred to him.

"And he agree?"

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"I don't know that Pettigrew will agree," answered Harry, shrugging, "but if Voldemort really wants us to hold off our efforts against him..."

Sirius refused to allow the sliver of hope that had formed within his chest to grow, quickly walling it off and sealing it away. He regarded his godson for a moment and asked warily, "How do you know he'll keep his word?"

Harry smiled humourlessly and said with calm certainty. "He won't."

"Have I said how much I don't like this?"

"Yes," confirmed Harry, smiling properly now. The smile dimmed slightly and then he continued in a low, pleading voice, "I'm asking you to trust me on this, Sirius."

Sirius wanted to do anything but leave this matter to Harry's judgement. He wanted to shout and scream and yell at the young wizard, to tell him that he was still just a child and should not try and meddle in the affairs of adults. He wanted to deny that the boy he thought of as a son was actually more involved in matters of the war than anyone else, even Dumbledore in a way.

He sighed, nodded in reluctant acceptance before offering a warning. "All right, but don't turn your back on him, Harry. If you do, you just might find a knife lodged between your shoulders."

Harry's smile was once again a humourless one as he nodded. "That's the only thing about this mess that I am absolutely sure about."

Harry waited for Sirius to go into Hogwarts alone, as Padfoot of course, to join up with Remus and the others before slipping past the now empty stands on the far side of the Quidditch pitch. He stealthily crept along until he was almost at the edge of the Forbidden Forest, where a pair of magical auras had caught his attention earlier.

"Well? What did they say when you spoke to them?"

He immediately recognised the voice, just as he had recognised the feel of her aura which was one of the strongest in the school. Harry cautiously peered around the tree he was hiding behind and confirmed his suspicions.

The two Defence Against the Dark Arts professors were standing in the shadows just within the borders of the forest. He had seen them when the match had begun, sitting in the staff box and apparently having a great deal of fun at Snape's expense. He could not, however, recall seeing them after the game had finished. Obviously they, or rather Gregory, had been busy meeting with someone within the forest.

Gregory, still dressing in bright red robes and clothes, shook his head ruefully before answering his wife, "Just that Mars is bright and the evening star moves swiftly."

Hilary quirked an eyebrow. "What the devil does that mean?"

"Damned if I know," confessed the wizard with a shrug. "You have a better chance of finding corners on a circle than you do of getting a straight answer out of that lot. In any case, I'm guessing they agreed."

"How'd you manage it?" she asked.

This time a broad smile split Gregory's face. "I told them they had to do it because they had already done it."

Hilary looked at him incredulously and asked, "And that actually worked?"

Harry decided that he had heard enough for the time being, especially as the pair of older magicians began to leave the secluded confines of the forest and walk back to the castle. He slipped silently into the shadows that had been hiding them earlier. He could not make any firm decision about the Proteus', since he had not managed to catch all of their conversation.

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Still, what he had overheard provided more than a little food for thought. Until now he had been of the opinion that the husband and wife team were on the same side as he, Ginny and the others, if only being a trifle eccentric.

Now he wasn't so sure.

"So, how much of that did he overhear?" asked Hilary, watching out the corner of her eyes as Harry melted into the shadows.

Gregory smiled, not bothering to look where their spectator was stealthily making his way back to the castle, carefully avoiding them.

"Just, enough to make me suspicious."

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19. Storm Warning

The alarm blared with deafening intensity, its undulating wail deep, clear and penetrating as it sounded through every corner of Hogwarts. The teachers and students paused in their conversation over lunch, listening to the sound, which signalled a possible attack on the school. After half a minute the siren call trailed off, allowing a booming voice to begin speaking.

"Hogwarts is under imminent attack. Death Eaters are approaching from the north, through the Forbidden Forest," the magically amplified voice of Harry Potter declared.

His sharp and precise words sparked everyone into action, even as he continued to announce the evacuation procedures that had been formulated after a similar attack the previous year.

"All students are to gather in the Practical Fighting Techniques auditorium. Staff members and Prefects are to act as escorts, making sure everyone proceeds in a quick and orderly manner. All available Aurors are to make a sweep of the corridors and classrooms, ensuring that there are no stragglers."

"Death Eater penetration onto Hogwarts grounds is estimated at twenty two minutes," picked up Ginny's voice, not as deep as Harry's but carrying just as clearly. *"Outer perimeter defences will be activated in ten minutes. All shield barriers will be raised and locked down in fifteen minutes. Situation Room will begin descent in twenty minutes."*

Ron and Hermione were the first out of the Great Hall, already hurrying to the nearest staircase leading up to the third floor. They had sprung into action the moment the first blaring of the siren had begun and were well out of the hall, their lunch half eaten and forgotten, by the time it ended.

As they hurried to their destination, taking the steps two or three at a time, Hermione glanced over at Ron. Her boyfriend had been caught in mid-sip when the alarm sounded and as a result the front of his light blue shirt was stained with spilt pumpkin juice. Ron did not appear to notice or care about his soggy condition; he was far too focused on reaching the Situation Room to be bothered by minor details like that.

"You-Know-Who would attack on Valentine's Day," he huffed as they reached the top of the stairs and immediately turned to run down the corridor leading to what had once been Fluffy's lair.

Hermione was too busy trying to ignore the stitch developing in her side to answer with more than an inarticulate grunt.

Reaching the large spiral staircase leading down to the Practical Fighting Techniques auditorium, Ron and Hermione quickly began to descend. Ron, who was leading, looked over his shoulder as they

hurried down and asked, "Last year it was during our Quidditch match with Ravenclaw. D'you think he'll do something similar next year?"

"Just - keep - running," Hermione panted, releasing her grip on the rail when they reached the bottom of the staircase. Twisting hard on her heel, almost tripping over her own feet in the process, she proceeded to hurry across the small entry hall and through the centre pair of huge oak doors that opened into the auditorium.

Bursting into the Situation Room, as it was designated during a crisis, Hermione and Ron sprinted down the middle aisle to the wide stage. Harry and Ginny were waiting patiently in the centre of the stage, the Situation Map glowing at their feet. As they tumbled onto the stage Harry glanced down at his wristwatch, which Ginny had given to him the previous Christmas.

He looked approvingly over to Ginny and noted, "Three minutes, seven seconds."

"Faster than last time," agreed Ginny, scribbling the time onto a piece of parchment she held in her hand. She twitched an eyebrow in his direction. "Of course, they were only in the Great Hall this time, not in Gryffindor Tower."

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"It is closer," Harry acknowledged easily, turning to smile at Ron and Hermione as they joined Ginny and him.

By this time Hermione had caught on to what was happening, or rather what was not happening, and was thoroughly annoyed with her friends. She was not shy about displaying her annoyance either. Placing both hands on her hips and glaring up at Harry through the messy tangle of her hair, which had fallen into disarray during their mad rush to the Situation Room, Hermione scowled at him and demanded evenly, "This is just a *drill*?"

Ron, who was bent over double and gasping for breath, looked up just as Harry and Ginny grinned impishly, thereby confirming Hermione's accusation. He shook his head. "If 'Mione and I don't kill you, the rest of the school will. You interrupted lunch."

"Why on earth didn't you tell us?" asked Hermione, still glaring at them.

"If we'd told you," replied Ginny mildly, "it wouldn't have been much of a 'surprise' evacuation drill."

"Besides," Harry continued, "we told Dumbledore and Idaho this morning, during breakfast. They were the ones that approved the drill."

Hermione shook her head and muttered, "I was busy finishing up on the Transfiguration essay

Professor McGonagall gave us last week. Now I'll never have enough time to make it perfect."

Harry offered the bushy haired young witch a mischievous look. "You should never actually manage to achieve perfection, Hermione. What else would there be for you to aim for, if you ever did?"

"Maintaining that perfection," answered Hermione, as though it were perfectly obvious.

"But true perfection wouldn't need to be maintained," teased Ginny impishly.

Hermione blinked in consternation. She scowled slightly as she considered this idea. Finally she settled for folding her arms across her chest and giving her friends a disgruntled look as they unsuccessfully tried to stifle their smiles.

By now the first of the other students were beginning to hurry into the auditorium, their excited and sometimes worried chatter filling the air. Harry and Ginny quickly convinced Ron to start acting the part of examining the Situation Map, with Hermione watching closely over his shoulder.

The minutes seemed to pass interminably, either lasting no time at all or stretching on for what felt like an eternity. Harry, who was observing the filling auditorium keenly, would occasionally call out a time for Ginny to jot down. Finally the three entrances into the room swung shut with a reverberating boom, signalling everyone had retreated into the safety of the Situation Room and that the drill was now concluded.

"Eighteen minutes, twenty two seconds," announced Harry once a modicum of impatient silence had settled over the waiting students. He smiled with quiet satisfaction and added, "An improvement of nearly a minute and a half since the drill we held last month. Congratulations."

"What?" bellowed Snape, looking distinctly displeased.

Professor Dumbledore, who was standing where the four heads of house were grouped, placed a calming hand on the Potions Master's shoulder. He shook his head slightly before releasing Snape and moving down to join Harry, Ginny, Hermione and Ron on the stage. Following right behind the headmaster was Duncan Idaho, the senior Auror stationed at the school.

"How did it go?" asked Harry once the two wizards had reached them.

"The usual mix of blind panic and excitement," admitted Idaho, a touch of annoyance creeping into his usually even voice. "Almost the same as last time we held a drill. Despite the improved time getting here, there was little improvement in the organisation of it."

"What the fu-"

"Ron!!" exclaimed Hermione, appalled, cutting him off.

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All eyes immediately turned to the young wizard, who was standing over the section of the map representing the lake. He had been peering intently at something on the map, but looked up at when Hermione's yell registered. He had the good grace to blush fiercely upon realizing what he had just said and in whose presence.

Dumbledore, rather than being angered by the severity of Ron's curse, actually seemed somewhat amused though still bore himself in a stern manner. He pushed his spectacles up the length of his crooked nose and asked, "Ronald?"

Ron looked up at them all, surprise etched on his face.

"It's Malfoy. Lucius Malfoy."

"You know, I've been thinking," Ginny began as they Apparated into the Great Hall.

"Now I'm worried," Harry interjected, looking far less serious than Ginny felt the situation warranted. Ginny bit off her sharp retort as Dumbledore, the Proteuses, Idaho and half a dozen Aurors used their Portkey bracelets to transport themselves out of the now secured Situation Room. Their arrival coincided with Lucius Malfoy's own entry into the Great Hall.

The Malfoy patriarch looked as well groomed and disdainfully aristocratic as he always had, even before becoming a fugitive. His black silk and velvet robes were perfectly tailored and pressed, swirling out behind him as he strode down the centre of the hall to meet them.

"Snotty git," muttered Ginny, who was glaring balefully at Lucius as he approached.

"Calm yourself, Virginia," said Dumbledore, moving to stand between her and Harry, placing a kindly hand on each of their shoulders. He smiled in the calm and unassuming manner that was so uniquely his, though Ginny noticed that it was not mirrored in his watchful eyes. "Just because he's the enemy does not mean we have to be rude."

Gregory Proteus, who was standing just behind the headmaster, nodded in agreement and added solemnly, "Besides, he'll be getting his just deserts before the day is out."

Dumbledore shot the younger wizard a sharp look just as Hilary, his wife, jabbed him in the ribs with an elbow and whispered, "Don't give them any ideas!"

Gregory raised his hands in appeasement, taking a judicious step back from the group as Lucius stepped up directly in front of them. His cold grey eyes flicked briefly over Gregory and Hilary, who he had obviously not encountered before. With a subtle sneer he visibly dismissed them both of having any importance and turned his attention solely upon Harry.

"Potter," he acknowledged with a miniscule tip of his head.

"Malfoy," responded Harry with an equally small nod of greeting.

Lucius finally recognised the remainder of Harry's companions, this time not curbing his sneer when his glance slid past Ginny. He focused upon Idaho for several seconds, appraising the man, before matching his cold stare against Dumbledore's. Ginny, who was watching the Death Eater closely, could not see the headmaster's response, but was easily able to feel the gathering of Dumbledore's magic. Clearly Lucius' disrespectful comportment was not sitting well with the venerable wizard. Harry cleared his throat, somewhat impatiently Ginny thought, and drew Lucius' attention back to him. He tilted his head to one side and asked, "I assume you're here for a reason and not a social call."

"Hardly a social call, Potter," Lucius snarled, clearly displeased with the situation. He turned to one side, presenting his profile for inspection, and continued, "My Lord has seen fit to grant your request. He is willing to hand over Pettigrew in exchange for your assistance in the final dispersion of the Well of Shadows."

"The original agreement was only that we would not actively move against him," Harry immediately replied, his tone clipped.

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Lucius visibly clenched his teeth, a flush of pink spreading across his pale cheeks, before responding in an equally clipped manner. "Lord Voldemort will never give something for nothing, even if it is Pettigrew's paltry contribution to his cause. If you want more out of this agreement than simply staying out of each other's way, then you'd best be prepared to contribute more. You will actively aid in removing the threat posed by the Well, or these negotiations are over."

That pompous... arrogant... Ginny began, feeling her blood pressure begin to rise.

~Calm down, Gin~ Harry told her, surreptitiously reaching out to take her hand. *~We were expecting something like this, remember?~*

Ginny managed to suppress her need to punch Lucius' lights out and nodded, *Yeah, but it still goes against the grain.*

Harry smiled darkly and asked, "Why do you believe we would aid in 'removing the threat'?"

Especially when Draco's efforts are curtailing your own little raids quite nicely."

"Don't try to play me for a fool, Potter!" Lucius snapped, resentment of some sort flashing in his steely grey eyes. "You are fully aware that practically all of the incursions since December have been solely the work of the Well of Shadows."

"Yes," agreed Idaho, barging into the discussion. He smirked at Lucius, who was glaring wands and Killing Curses at the dark haired chief Auror, and added, "We noticed the most recent attacks have been far more efficient than any you Death Eaters tried to stage. Unlike you amateurs, Draco never leaves any survivors."

Lucius turned away from Idaho with an audible exhalation and said coldly, "That is what the Well of Shadows was created for."

Dumbledore shifted his stance and said mildly, "I find it curious, Lucius, that you have not once called your son by name."

"My son is not an issue here," Lucius said shortly. An expression crossed his eyes, one that Ginny couldn't quite identify before it was gone.

"Plausible deniability, eh, Lucius?" asked Harry. When the Death Eater failed to react to the words, undoubtedly because he was unfamiliar with the Muggle saying, Harry elaborated, "It means you've washed your hands of the matter. You're no longer acknowledging that the entire situation is *your own damned fault*."

Ginny could tell this had struck a cord in the Death Eater by the way Lucius' jaw clenched and unclenched, not to mention how his back stiffened until it was almost painfully straight. For her own part Ginny felt a shiver lightly tickle its way up her spine, though she could think of no reason why

she should respond to Harry needling Lucius in such a way. The situation certainly did not warrant such a reaction from her.

After taking a good many moments to compose himself Lucius practically growled, "I am here to discuss Lord Voldemort's gracious offer to cease open hostilities and transfer into your custody Peter Pettigrew in exchange for your cooperation in dispersing the Well of Shadows. No more. Now, do you accept my Lord's proposal... or not?"

Harry made an act of pausing to consider. Anyone would have thought he was giving the matter all the due deliberation it required. Ginny was the only person present who could hear and feel the low bubbling train of his real thoughts... and the fact that he was simply being dramatic.

You should've been an actor, love, she told him, hiding her smile.

~I'm the Boy-Who-Lived. Being a celebrity teaches you how to act~ he answered, keeping his face carefully neutral.

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Ginny shivered involuntarily and again wondered at the reason. Harry was easily capable of making her shiver, but the tone of his thoughts at the moment was not one that normally generated such a response from her. It was just that at that moment an inexplicable, though oddly familiar chill had run through her.

In fact, she noted with some puzzlement, she was not the only one. Idaho, standing beside her, had crossed his arms. It did not seem significant at first, but then Ginny saw that he was surreptitiously rubbing his hands over his biceps.

"Accepting Voldemort's proposal would seem a prudent course of action," Harry finally admitted. He then looked Lucius levelly in the eyes and added, "However I retain the belief that such easy acceptance would be... dangerous."

"Rejecting my Lord's offer is even more dangerous," Lucius replied, not bothering to even lightly veil the threat.

Harry suddenly shivered.

Lucius immediately noticed the action and quickly tried to take advantage of it. "Perhaps it is merely that you are, as I have always maintained, a mere *boy*. Hardly capable on any level to make such *adult* decisions, in fear of overstepping your bounds."

"Hardly," replied Harry, his eyes narrowing. Ginny could feel a low anger beginning to boil within her boyfriend. Then she noticed that several of the half a dozen Aurors stationed around the Great Hall were also shivering, acting as if it were far colder than Ginny knew it to be.

What the devil is going on here? She wondered.

"Then why do you tremble, Potter?" Lucius asked silkily. His lips curled into a cruel smile as he voiced his opinion. "It looks very much like fear to me."

Idaho interrupted, angrily defending Harry. "And you would know, wouldn't you?"

Lucius lazily waved a dismissive hand. "I have seen it in the eyes of many."

Satisfaction suffused Ginny when Lucius' voice abruptly trailed off. His eyes grew wide and a slight tremble ran up his black-clad frame. Her pleasure in seeing the Death Eater suffer from the same mysterious affliction was short lived, however, as another chill seemed to embrace her.

"Harry, this is Ron. Can you hear me?"

Harry frowned and reached for the Portkey bracelet he was wearing. Neither he nor Ginny required the specialized Portkeys to move about Hogwarts while its defences were engaged, but the bracelets doubled as communication devices. Pressing down on one of the ten numbered studs, arrayed on the back of the thick bracelets, Harry answered the call.

"Loud and clear, Ron," he said. "What is it?"

"Something strange is going on, Harry, Ron's disembodied voice answered.

Hermione's voice then spoke up, *"The Situation Map has gone... fuzzy. If I didn't know better, I'd say it was the same as static on a Muggle television; as if something were interfering with its operation."*

Ron then asked, *"D'you think it could be that git, Malfoy?"*

"It's not Lucius," answered Harry, shooting the man in question an appraising glance. He shook his head and asked, "How much of the map is affected? All of it, or just around the castle?"

"All of it, I'm afraid," confirmed Hermione's voice. *"In fact, I think it's getting worse. Pretty soon we won't even be able to make heads or tails of anything on it. As it is we're already having trouble reading the dots."*

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Harry looked towards Lucius again, a peculiar expression forming on his face, and slowly nodded. He glanced over at Ginny, his face and eyes conveying his realization more easily than any words or thoughts he might form. Ginny immediately understood and suddenly the cause of the faint chill permeating her being became very clear.

"Draco."

Ron Weasley found himself faced with an odd quandary.

One large part of him was currently crying out for him to leave the safety of the Situation Room, to use his Portkey bracelet to deploy up to the Great Hall. Once that was accomplished he felt the overwhelming desire to seek out Draco Malfoy and kill the smarmy bugger. As painfully and slowly as possible, in retribution for all the harm he had inflicted upon Ron, his family and especially Hermione.

Another equally large part of him, however, was well aware that only Harry and Ginny possessed the abilities needed to confront Draco. It cautioned him to do his best to remain calm and, even if he

wasn't a Prefect, try to maintain that calm which also existed in the rest of the students now sheltered in the Situation Room, deep beneath Hogwarts.

Then, annoyingly, there was one small part that was screaming in mortal terror at the prospect of coming face to face with the monster that had put Ron in a coma for four months.

"The Situation Room has been lowered into its secure position," he reported, pressing down on the principal stud on his Portkey bracelet. He glanced over to the other side of the stage where Gurney Halleck, Idaho's second in command, was organising the rest of the Aurors for their deployment along the school's battlements. "Halleck should be sending up the first squad of Aurors any second now."

"*He already has, thanks Ron,*" confirmed Harry's voice over the link established by the bracelets he, Ron and the others were wearing.

Hermione, who had been examining the Situation Map, came to stand next to Ron. She silently slipped her injured right arm around his waist, a sign of her nervousness. "Harry," she reported, using Ron's bracelet rather than her own, "the map is completely out of focus now. We can't read anything; the lines are so badly blurred."

It was Ginny that answered, "*That shouldn't be a problem, Hermione. We've moved up onto the walls and, trust me, there's no way we could miss Draco's approach.*"

"What's it look like?" Ron asked curiously, silently cursing that yet again he would not be able to see the battle transpiring high above them. He felt just as helpless now as he had the first time he had overseen a battle using the Situation Map, on the Ides of March the previous year.

"*Hell on earth,*" was Harry's bland response, "*and it's coming our way.*"

"*Really?*" interrupted a voice Ron recognised as belonging to Victor, one of the younger Aurors stationed at Hogwarts. He continued to say, "*I think it looks more, y'know, like Bugs Bunny digging on steroids... and he forgot that left turn at Albuquerque again.*"

It was only Hermione that seemed to understand the bizarre statement, undoubtedly because of her Muggle upbringing, and she shook her head. Sighing she pulled away from Ron and activated her own bracelet to tell him, "Vic... you scare me sometimes."

Ron noticed that Halleck had finished arranging his Aurors and that they had all Portkeyed up to the Great Hall. Most of the staff had also left to join in the defence of the school, with the exception of McGonagall, Hagrid, Vector and (unfortunately) Trelawney. He reported as much to Harry and added, "I think some of the older students, including Moira, want to join you up there. What should we tell them?"

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"Absolutely not, Mister Weasley!" announced McGonagall. The deputy headmistress, having deployed the remaining three teachers around the perimeter of the auditorium, had walked out onto the stage to join Ron and Hermione.

"*I'm afraid Professor McGonagall is correct, Ronald,*" confirmed Dumbledore's authoritative voice. Apparently the headmaster had also been listening in on the conversation between the only four students participating in the proceedings. "*According to Harry and Virginia, dispersing the Well of Shadows has great potential for magical backlashes. I do not want to needlessly risk any of the students should the situation get out of hand.*"

"Understood sir," Ron agreed. He paused and asked falteringly, "Since the Situation Map is not working, may Hermione and I join you?"

Harry's voice was unexpectedly tense as he answered, "*I'm afraid not, Ron. From the look of things, Draco's not quite as inexperienced in the art of war as we originally thought.*"

McGonagall frowned and asked, "What d'you mean by that, Mister Potter?"

"*He's raised some kind of anti-Portkey ward around the school. Ginny and I only felt it being formed a minute ago. It's a strong one too, even more powerful than the one I put in place last year. I doubt that even the specialized Portkeys we have for evacuation and deployment will be able to slip through.*"

"*In other words, nobody's leaving this party until either Draco or the rest of us are dead,*" summed up Ginny succinctly.

"Miss Granger," directed McGonagall, turning to Hermione. "Assemble a dozen students, a mix of first and seventh years if you can. Give them one of the evacuation Portkeys and test if Mister Potter and Miss Weasley's suspicions are correct."

Hermione nodded and strode off the stage, pointing out students as she spotted them. Ron glanced to the back of the auditorium where the cabinets holding the Portkeys, in the form of Muggle hula-hoops, were arranged. If the specially built Portkeys, which were designed for a one-way trip to the Auror Headquarters at the Ministry, were not working it meant that everyone inside the Situation Room was effectively trapped beneath the school.

Shaking his head, he considered the thick bracelet on his wrist. A thought occurred to him and he asked, "Harry, Ginny, d'you think whatever it is Draco's doing, it'll affect our communications?"

"*We don't know for sure,*" replied Ginny. "*We certainly hope not.*"

"*I think he's nearly here,*" Harry announced with remarkable calmness. "*Hold the fort while we're away, Ron. With luck this won't take long.*"

Ron shared a look with Professor McGonagall and asked, "And without luck?"

"I suggest you prepare yourself, Lucius," Harry told the elder Malfoy. "You son will be arriving shortly and I think he will wish to speak with you."

"I don't think that would be a prudent move on my part," answered Lucius, his mounting nervousness clearly visible as they stood on the castle ramparts. The silver haired wizard was clearly apprehensive about the upcoming confrontation, unable to escape from facing it as he had the similar situation over

Christmas. Draco's anti-Portkey ward had disabled his personal Portkey as well as all the others, stranding him at Hogwarts for the duration of what was to come.

Lucius winced at the admission, but was able to state in a reasonably level voice, "I am man enough to admit that Draco is likely to be... displeased with my role in his transformation into the Well of Shadows."

Harry nodded in acquiescence to this observation and said, "True, he *might* even kill you."

Lucius turned to face him and asked, "Then why should I accompany you?"

"Because if you don't," replied Harry blandly, "I *will* kill you."

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Ignoring the dumbstruck expression that had suddenly formed upon Lucius' face, Harry turned away from the Death Eater and strode along the battlements to where Ginny, Dumbledore and Idaho were grouped. He nodded briefly to both men, before moving to stand at Ginny's side, making sure to be just close enough that their shoulders could brush together.

This time it was not a drill, nor was it simply a matter of facing down whatever twisted creatures Draco was sending to try and test their defences. This was going to be an encounter that would almost certainly leave at least one of the participants dead.

~Not quite the bright, sunshine filled day this morning started out as~ his girlfriend commented sarcastically as Harry took up position beside her. She was looking out over the grounds, to the broad expanse of the Forbidden Forest, which was shrouded in darkness.

It was overcast this morning, replied Harry, following her gaze.

In truth, the morning had been rather dreary and dank. A thick layer of dull pewter grey clouds had hung low in the sky, while wisps of light fog had obscured the ground. What had been a plain and miserably mundane autumn day at Hogwarts --even though it was Valentine's Day-- was now the single most foreboding atmosphere Harry had ever encountered.

The layer of clouds had thickened and grown taller and higher, darkening into a deep purple, run through with dark blues and greys that were almost black. This covering blanket completely blocked the sun from sight, giving the impression that it was near the twilight hour, rather than just after midday.

Occasional drops of rain, fat and heavy, were dropping down from above. The growing chill that continued to encroach upon the school and its grounds was different to that which had accompanied the scores of Dementors that had led Voldemort's attack the previous year. Then the chill had been solely felt in their minds and bodies; the chill brought about by the approach of the Well of Shadows pervaded everything, including the air around it.

It was difficult to see through the darkness shrouding the Well's arrival, but occasionally a flash of lightning would crack overhead. In these brief moments of cold illumination, Harry and the others could make out the indefinable maelstrom of shadows that were slowly drawing nearer to Hogwarts, tearing and rending great tracks of the forest with each passing second.

At this rate, Harry mused after one particularly bright bolt of lightning struck down in the very heart of the forest, *there won't be much of a forest left by the time he gets here.*

He the embodiment of darkness, noted Osiris wryly. **Of course he's not going to worry about a bunch of useless trees that might happen to get in his way.**

Ginny shook her head. "He's certainly making a mess. Obviously he isn't going to bother with a subtle approach."

Harry nodded in thoughtful agreement. "Yeah, in fact I think he's deliberately making a show of it.

Ensuring that he had our complete and utter attention."

"Rather childish," said Ginny.

He's insane, Virginia, Romulus reminded them. **Our past encounters with the Well have shown that they invariably develop a need, however irrational, to prove themselves.**

In other words, repeated Sun Tzu, **They begin to act rather childish.**

Harry ignored the light-hearted, but slightly forced, banter of the Order. Instead he maintained his vigil on the looming blackness that somehow appeared to stand out against the dark surrounding it. The rain was beginning to fall harder now, no longer only a few isolated drops here and there.

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By now the sounds of the devastation Draco was wreaking upon the forest, as he ploughed his way through it and towards Hogwarts, was beginning to reach the ears of those assembled on the stone ramparts. Sharp cracks echoed thinly in the air as massive and ancient trees --as wide across as a three adults with their arms outstretched and even older than the school itself-- were torn apart and shattered like weak kindling.

He looked away, gazing down the length of the ramparts and the line of faces looking out upon the grounds. They were pale, but steadfast and set with a grim determination. Harry recognised many of the faces, those Aurors whose division had been stationed at Hogwarts this year. He, Ginny and Hermione were on familiar terms with most of the younger ones, who more readily accepted the Boy-Who-Lived and his friends as equals. The older Aurors were less approachable, but had developed a grudging respect for the students since the incident with the dragons over Christmas.

Standing slightly apart from the assembled Aurors and teachers was Lucius, whose pointed features stood out starkly in the harsh flashes of lightning. His lips were drawn into a thin line, pressed so tightly together that they were drained of blood and almost the same pale shade as the rest of his face. A growing wind had begun to tousle the long silver locks of his normally immaculate hair, causing it to fall in disarray around his face.

"Is everything ready?" he asked Ginny, pensively crossing his arms over his chest.

"I hope so," she said. She looked very nervous and very young at the moment, not what anyone would expect from a young witch with enough power to shatter mountains. She swallowed and looked up at him. "We're taking an awful risk, Harry. Especially if things don't go according to plan. This had better work."

"It will work, Gin," he assured her. "After all, we grew the focusing crystals ourselves. They're absolutely perfect – we made certain of that. We don't have to worry about them or the diffusion prisms. Albus gave the job of cutting those to Nicolas Flamel – and he's had nearly six hundred years of experience making them."

Ze man, for all 'is quirks, doez 'ave talent, agreed Joan, lightly.

Ginny took a deep breath, ignoring the mounting wind that swirled around them. "I have to admit he did a brilliant job. Those prisms are better quality than we could've managed in twice the time. It's the question of whether or not we managed to position all the components correctly that's bothering me the most. If we're even the slightest fraction off..."

Harry wrapped one arm comfortingly around her shoulders. "We did not forget anything, love. Everything is placed exactly as required. We've check and rechecked against the ambient magical fields surrounding the castle. We've personally placed each and every one of the foci, double-checking each other as we went. This will work - there's no doubt about it. In any case, it's out of our hands now."

A loud crack of thunder snapped their attention back to the gloom enveloped Forbidden Forest, where a deep growl of rushing wind could be heard. Debris, from the hundreds of trees caught and destroyed in the Well's approach, swirled and whipped through the air like a blizzard. Darkness, an impenetrable and inky black, seemed to leap from one surviving tree to the next, moving as though it was alive rather than merely flickering shadows.

Lightning flashed overhead, framing Hogwarts in its stark light, as a sudden calm settled all around. The tempest of debris, wind and rain that was lashing over the castle abruptly died down and stilled. This, they instinctively knew, was the anticipated calm before the true storm would begin.

You had best get ready, Harry, instructed Merlin in his normal calm and sanguine voice.

Harry took a steady breath and tried to sound positive about the situation he was about to thrust himself headfirst into. "Don't worry too much, Gin. Just wait until Draco's in position, or until I give the signal. Unlike everything else we've set up, the trigger is entirely in your hands."

Ginny smiled wanly. "Literally. I just hope it works."

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"It *will* work," insisted Harry. "After all, we built the bloody thing."

"Be careful, Harry," she urged him. "I don't want to lose you."

Harry smiled confidently and bent down to briefly kiss her cheek. He wrapped a strong arm around her shoulders and told her, "Don't worry, Gin, I have an excellent sense of direction."

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20. In the Shadow of Death

There was an indefinable moment of nothingness. Then with a rush the world blossomed into existence around Harry, leaving him standing midway between the secure walls of Hogwarts and the edge of the Forbidden Forest. He blinked a few times to reorient himself before sparing a glance towards his reluctant companion.

"Relax, Malfoy," he told Lucius, who had Apparated down onto the grounds alongside him. A thin smile graced his lips. "Your son has yet to make an appearance."

"He doesn't need to," retorted Lucius, nervously licking his lips as he scanned the impenetrable blackness that seemed to writhe with a life of its own just within the boundaries of the forest. His grey eyes were skipping uneasily from spot to spot, trying to make out something within the shadows. "He could kill us where we stand."

Harry stifled an unpleasant smile, briefly closing his eyes. Thanks to the Order's influence he could feel the magic surrounding them, making it easy for him to pinpoint Draco's position ahead of them. He opened his eyes, looking to where he knew Draco would soon be emerging, aware of his presence only through the almost painful lack of normal magic at that one point.

He let out a deep breath, which he had unconsciously held while searching the magic surrounding them. His breath came in a billowing cloud of vapour, proving that the Well of Shadows was exerting a strong influence around the immediate area. He did not turn to look at Lucius, but could see the man shivering at the edge of his vision.

"True," he agreed. "He won't though. He'll want to talk first."

"Are you certain of that, Potter?" Lucius asked waspishly. "Or are you simply guessing?"

Harry could barely restrain the brief grin that caused his lips to twitch. He glanced away from the foreboding shadows of the forest and asked, "D'you really want me to answer that, Lucius?"

Lucius considered it. He swallowed nervously, shook his head, and muttered, "No. I think I'd rather you didn't."

Here it comes, remarked Beowulf, drawing Harry's attention away from Lucius.

Gin? he called silently. *This is it. Get the others ready.*

Ginny reply was laden with her worry for him, *~Just so long as you don't take any unnecessary risks, Harry. If you do anything stupid, like the last time, I'll be forced to kill you.~*

Harry was too busy trying to watch what was approaching to reply. The shadows flowed out from the surviving trees bordering the edge of the forest. It was a disconcerting sight; hundreds of shapeless forms flowing across the ground like living quicksilver, darting from spot to spot as they steadily and inevitably drew nearer.

From the corner his eye Harry could see Lucius fingering his wand, caressing its slender length uneasily. Admittedly he felt much the same --as the gnawing disquiet in his belly proved-- but Harry could not risk having the older wizard setting his son off before the time was right.

"Steady on," he murmured, his eyes remaining fixed on the undulating shadows that were now rapidly drawing together roughly ten paces in front of them. He let out the smallest of breaths when Lucius visibly struggled to relax, though it was clear he desperately wanted anything but to face what was coming.

He watched, with admittedly morbid curiosity, as the shadows gathered into a single patch of darkness before them. It shifted and squirmed about, wisps of blue-black against coal black mixed with pitchblack rising up into the air like some kind of negative wraith. Harry found himself consciously struggling not to shiver as the cold surrounding him grew more and more intense with each passing moment.

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Then, as the swirling trails of shadows that danced before them, the darkness seemed to coalesce and take on a definite shape. It was rough and lacking in detail at first, like an unfinished putty statue, but gradually a form began to emerge. As he slowly began to extract himself from the veil of shadows, which had slowly been consuming him these past months, Draco Malfoy spoke in a whisper that echoed strangely, as if being heard from a great distance... or a great depth.

"Ah! So very good to see you again, Potter," he said, a cruel smile twisting his lips as he took a step forward, his body now full formed. His voice had also regained its normal volume and timbre as he spread his arms wide in greeting and said, "Come here and give me a hug."

"Forgive me if I prefer not to," retorted Harry, appraising his long-time nemesis.

Draco had changed a great deal since Harry had last seen him, in a vision shortly before Halloween. Before his demeanour and appearance were now greatly at odds with the memories Harry had of the Slytherin boy that had hounded him for so long.

His clothes, no longer fine and expensive and stylish, were a simple set of tunic, trousers and boots underneath flowing robes. Their cut conveyed a vaguely martial air, somewhat Oriental in design, but with overtones of many other cultures - both Wizarding and Muggle. It was the latter that gave Harry pause, since Draco's disdain for anything Muggle was very well known. Clearly the Well's constant presence in his mind and body had caused great changes within him.

Turning his attention back to the wizard (if he could still be called that) himself, Harry noted with morbid curiosity the physical changes Draco had undergone. His once steel grey eyes were black obsidian chips that gleamed with some strange lack of light. They were set within his once refined features that were now such a pale shade of white as to have an almost translucent quality. What little light managed to penetrate the ever-present veil of darkness that cloaked Draco's entire being gave his skin a lustrous and ethereal quality - not unlike the silvery glow of a Hogwarts ghost.

All of this was framed by a wild, barely tamed mane that fell --shifting and rippling, as if in possession of a life of its own-- to his shoulders. Where once his locks had been a gleaming silver blonde, Draco could now almost be mistaken as Harry's twin, looking very much as if he too had inherited James Potter's unruly black hair.

Harry finally let his gaze meet Draco's burning black eyes and asked politely, "So, Draco, how's life been treating you?"

"Like a god," replied Draco brashly. He cocked his head to one side and asked, "You?"

"Not quite that well," admitted Harry, "but good enough."

"Oh, how delightful," Draco suddenly gushed with what was clearly artificial enthusiasm. He had directed his gaze towards his father, Lucius. Harry could almost swear that the black fire behind Draco's eyes intensified. "I see I've been fortunate enough to visit dear old Hogwarts on the same day as my beloved father. What a happy coincidence."

Lucius drew a long and, obviously, steadying breath before addressing his son in an imperious tone of voice that Harry knew would not sit well with Draco. "Lord Voldemort is not pleased with your recent... escapades, Draco."

Draco narrowed his eyes to fine slits and regarded Lucius in much the same way that a scientist would regard a rather common and uninteresting insect. It was a look that posed the question as to whether he would choose to merely examine Lucius... or squash him.

"D'you know what the worst feeling in the world is, Father?" Draco asked abruptly, his eyes growing wide so that his black irises were surrounded by shining white. He waited, in that calm and so patient way that only the truly insane can achieve, until Lucius cautiously shook his head. His lips, pressed tightly into a thin line, twisted into an almost sad smile as he told his father, "It's slowly going mad and knowing there's nothing you can do about it."

"You know," Harry realized, speaking out loud in his surprise.

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****Interesting,**** commented Osiris, ****Never in all of the Order's few encounters with it has the Well ever realized its insanity.****

Draco smirked and answered, but did not turn his eyes away from Lucius. "Of course I know, Potter. I'm not an idiot like you, prone to stumbling about like a blind fool - completely ignorant of what's going on around me."

Harry was puzzled by this and asked, "Then why'd you let Voldemort change you?"

"I didn't know then," was the sardonic reply, one that brought a dangerous smile to Draco's lips and an even more dangerous gleam into his eyes. Not for a moment did he let his gaze waver from Lucius as he added, "Now that I do... now that I know to what extent I was betrayed... I will be sure to take my

revenge on everyone involved."

"*Avada Kedavra!*"

Lucius, his nervousness finally getting the better of him, had drawn his wand in a swift and practiced motion. He levelled it at Draco's chest and shouted the Killing Curse, causing a blast of green light to cross between the short distance almost instantly.

It passed right through Draco - as if he were not really there.

"You have done something most *unwise*, Lucius."

A concussive blast of shadow erupted from Draco with all the suddenness and unexpectedness of a dormant volcano blowing its top off. The discharge, however, was not aimed at Lucius, but rather at Harry. He was only just able to raise a quick shield before the roiling wall of black shadows slammed into him with unbelievable force. Had it not been for his Shield Charm, Harry doubted he would have weathered the blow without injury. As it was, Harry was lifted up into the air and knocked across the lawn, coming to a jarring landing nearly twenty paces away from where he had been standing.

"You have made me angry," he could hear Draco saying coldly, although the ringing in his ears made the words warble oddly. Draco's voice managed to grow even colder, accompanied by frigid waves of barely controlled anger. "And the Well of Shadows can be most unpleasant when he is angry!"

"Stay back, boy," Lucius ordered frantically. "Stay back!"

Harry looked up from where he lay, sprawled on the ground, and watched as Draco began to bear down on his father. The young man slowly drifted forward, his feet scarcely even touching the ground. All round Draco the air was swirling with thin tendrils of icy mist which was rising up from the earth and being caught in the nearly invisible vortex of power emanating from him.

By now Lucius was visibly panicking. He levelled his wand at Draco's feet and shouted, "*Erupto!*"

With a resounding crack and a deep rumble like distant thunder, the ground at Draco's feet exploded up around him in a shower of rock, stone and earth. It was like watching an avalanche rushing upwards instead of down a mountain slope. The force Lucius had put behind the spell was clearly evident in how high some of the rubble was launched, some of it quite large, rising high in the air before dropping down like a rain of cold brimstone.

But Draco was not there.

Just as Lucius had cast the spell Draco had skipped to one side, yet at the same time appeared not to have moved at all. As the upheaval ended and the dust slowly began to settle, Draco looked over from where he was standing, and contemplated the torn up patch of earth he had been passing over. He looked back to his father and said mockingly, "If that's the best you can do, Father, I'm going to have to kill you."

Lucius was clearly becoming desperate. With Hogwarts sealed off there was nowhere for him to run, so all he could do was try to fight. But if a Killing Curse had no visible effect, then it was unlikely that anything else would. The next curse he tried was the Cruciatus Curse, only to have Draco bat it off with contemptuous ease. Then Lucius, apparently hoping to weaken the Well by driving back the oppressing shadows which seemed everywhere, swept his wand in a tight arc.

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"*Conflagrio!*" he yelled, crackling flames shooting outward from him.

"Ah! You wish to make a fight of it then... so much the better," said Draco, nonchalantly stepping through the wall of fire between him and Lucius. He spared a glance over his shoulder at the fire, which was abruptly engulfed and extinguished by rising shadows.

Harry watched, unable to bring himself to move and intervene, as Lucius began to hurl curse after curse at Draco. He used predominantly Dark Arts spells to begin with, but soon found himself using whatever sprang to mind as he began to back away. His steps were small at first, but soon Lucius was stumbling back with such haste that he was almost tripping over his own feet as he went. It was no surprise when he stumbled and fell to the ground, bracing himself with one arm while keeping up a steady stream of spell and curses with the wand held in the other.

All this time Draco continued to steadily draw nearer and nearer to the panicked man. He ignored those curses that struck him with no effect and occasionally stepped to one side as a massive explosion or ball of flame or something similar passed through where he had been standing. More often than not he continued through whatever was thrown at him as if it were no more harmful than plain air. Finally he came to a halt at Lucius' feet, even though his father continued to shout off curses and tried to scrabble backwards.

"My dear father, honestly," Draco said disparagingly. He shook his head with faked pity and said in an almost shamed tone, "If you're not embarrassed for yourself, then I most certainly am."

Calmly, and with casual lack of effort, Draco reached out with one hand and plucked Lucius' wand from his hand. Holding it up for inspection, as Lucius looked on with dread, Draco sniffed dismissively and discarded the wand by tossing it over his shoulder. He smiled down at his father and, again with a casual lack of effort, reached down with one hand and picked Lucius up by the throat. Draco effortlessly hoisted Lucius into the air with one hand, despite the fact that his father was still a good deal larger than Draco (even after the changes the Well had brought about within him), and held Lucius a good foot off the ground. Lucius, for his part, was undeniably terrified beyond reason, clawing and scrabbling and punching and kicking at Draco with all his strength. Nothing he did seemed to move the Well by even the smallest of margins, serving only to cause the hand clasped around his throat to slowly tighten. The look of unadulterated terror that grace Lucius' face was horrible to see.

It was nothing, however, compared to the apprehensive prickling sensation that was running slowly up Harry's spine from the small of his back.

"Goodbye Father," Draco said casually, as if he were merely passing Lucius in the street, rather than strangling the life out of him. "I trust you will reserve a place for me in Hell."

Darkness gathered around the hand Draco was holding his father will, writhing and heaving before leaping forth and piercing into Lucius' exposed flesh. Almost immediately Lucius began to scream, his cries swiftly growing into an agonising wail that was almost deafening, even though Harry was over twenty yards away.

The shadows emerging from Draco's hand wrapped around Lucius, slithering over and around him in what seemed to Harry like a dreadful parody of snakes wrapping themselves around their prey. The piercing screams continued, rising louder and shriller with each passing second. It seemed impossible that a man could continue to scream for so long without pausing for breath, but Lucius' howls died not falter for even a moment.

Merciful gods, Harry wondered, watching with terrible fascination. *What is Draco doing to him?*

~Harry, can't you do anything?~ he heard Ginny pleading, her inner voice sounding and feeling as shaky as his own.

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Just listening to the relentless wails was enough to make Harry sick to his stomach. The shadows attacking Lucius almost completely covered him, yet still he continued to scream. The only relief Harry could find was that the shriek no longer sounded even remotely like something a human could manage, perhaps signalling that Lucius' end was near. Then, even as the screams continued to pierce the darkened air, the form dangling in Draco's grim seemed to diminish.

It's too late to do anything for him, he told Ginny, watching as the twisting and squirming shadows began to draw back into Draco, seemingly being absorbed into his hand. As the shadows withdrew, so the still struggling form of Lucius began to come undone. With horrifying slowness, the shadowy remains flicked about and dissipated, as the tortured shrieks trailed off into a silence that seemed deafening in the aftermath of such noise.

Of Lucius Malfoy there was not a trace left, not even his clothes.

~Screw this~ Ginny announced, her voice thick with fear. *~Harry get the hell back up here and away from that, that... just get away from it! We'll set the trap off from where we're both safe...~*

Doesn't work that way, Gin, he cut her off, finally finding the strength he needed to force himself back onto his feet. Standing up he struggled to at least give off the impression of being composed, even though he wanted nothing more than to throw up everything he had ever eaten throughout the course of his life. He swallowed as Draco let his arm fall limply to his side and then turned to face Harry, a satisfied --almost replete-- smile spread across his pale face.

"Ready to die, Potter?"

Harry shook his head and rejoined with more confidence than he felt, "I've been dead before. You should try it; it's very liberating."

Draco laughed. "Hardly. I have no intention of dying, even though that fate is inevitable, without taking what I want from this place - and all the people inside."

"Like father like son," Harry said, deliberately trying to goad his opponent. Draco was powerful beyond reason, his only weakness attainable through his own carelessness. Harry shook his head as if in disappointment. "I see you're just the same."

"I am nothing like my father. Lucius was just a greedy old fool," retorted Draco with an indifferent wave of a hand. He did not rise to the bait. "Greed is for amateurs. I'm aiming for something a little higher."

Harry arched an eyebrow. "That being?"

Draco grinned insanely and told him, "Genocide."

"You're insane," Harry declared, once the implications of Draco's answer began to impact on his mind. He carefully, so as not to draw attention, began to gather the Order's power to him.

"I know," rejoined Draco, still grinning. "It's even more liberating than death."

"I'm not joking, Malfoy," insisted Harry, drawing his wand. "You are *in*-sane."

Draco half nodded. His grin faded and was replaced by a serious expression. "Perhaps. Either way, I'm still going to kill you."

Harry raised his wand and assumed a duelling position. "You can try."

"And I shall succeed." Draco raised his left hand before him, and curled his fingers as though grasping something with them. As before, when he had killed Lucius, ripples of shadow formed around his hand. This time the tendrils gathered in his palm and stretched outwards, growing denser and thicker and more defined in their shape.

Harry swallowed the lump that had suddenly formed in his throat and returned his wand to its place within his robes. He would not be needing it. Not for the fight that would be soon be coming his way. After all, wands were very seldom instrumental in a swordfight. Even a magical one such as this.

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"Care to duel, Potter?" asked Draco, twirling the shimmering black sword he was holding about with an unnatural ease and confidence. The wicked blade, long and curved, seemed to be shifting and squirming about in a hazy blur of solid darkness.

"Not particularly."

Draco leapt at him, moving wickedly fast. He was like a living shadow, shifting about like the dancing patterns caused by a fire. Harry could not help but find himself admiring the sleek and smooth fluidity of the attack as Draco rushed. The shadowy blade leapt out at Harry, whistling through the air with a rushing sound preceding it - a noise that was not far removed from the tortured shrieks of a damned soul, such as Lucius Malfoy had made only minutes earlier.

As he had during their previous duel, at the first Practical Fighting Techniques class, Draco came at Harry with all the primal fury of an untamable Hungarian Horntail. The sword was a blur of a blur as Draco swung at him, clearly intent on ending this battle quickly, rather than drawing it out as he had with his father.

Harry, however, had a great deal of advantages over the late Lucius. As lightning fast as Draco was, Harry was just as fast. As lithe and nimble as the shadows made the Well, Harry was just as flexible and dexterous. And perhaps his greatest advantage - where Draco was attacking with an almost animalistic ferocity, Harry was reacting with a calm precision that enabled him to duck under, to the side and around each strike that came at him.

It was not easy, however, and far too often Draco came within a hair's breadth of slipping his blade past Harry's defences. Realizing that he would not be able to hold Draco off for very long without a weapon of his own, Harry back flipped away from the rampaging wizard, gaining enough space for him to call on the Order's power to conjure a sword to him. He did not particularly care which sword, be it his personally forged katana, the sword of Gryffindor or even the dagger Hagrid given him for his birthday the previous year.

No sword arrived.

Draco smiled viciously, baring his teeth in a snarl as he charged at Harry, quickly closing the distance Harry had made for himself. He was swinging wildly, recklessly, but moving so fast and erratically that Harry could not risk attempting to meet any of the attacks.

**Duck left!* came a sudden cry.

Instantly he dropped to the ground, falling and rolling to his left, gaining as much ground as he could before rolling back onto his feet. The urgent call from Heracles had saved his life, but not spared him a glancing blow. Draco's sword had cleaved through the air at an unexpected angle and just missed him, slicing a shallow trail across Harry's shoulder.

It was an agony that almost caused Harry to fall to the ground again. Coldness such as he had never felt before, even while standing face-to-face with a Dementor, had gripped his shoulder at the moment of contact. The numbing cold had spread rapidly down his arm and already Harry could no longer feel his fingers. He glanced down, while Draco was still whirling to face him, and saw that while he had lost all sensation in the limb, he still had full use of his hand and arm.

Why the devil can't I conjure up a sword? he asked, back stepping when Draco tried to disembowel him. He followed up with a backwards leap as the sword returned, managing to jump clear over the blade that would have taken his legs off at the knees otherwise.

~He's put up some sort of ward. It's such a different kind of magic that the Order can't penetrate it. At least not quickly enough to help you~ Ginny explained, having already had time to talk the matter over with the Order, since she was not fighting for her life at the moment. Her thoughts were desperate as she urged him, *~Transform! You might not be able to kill or stop him in your Griffin form, but at least you'll be safer!~*

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Harry ducked into a low squat, narrowly avoiding decapitation as Draco's sword brushed through his hair and actually sliced a few strands off. He came up in a low drive and slammed his elbow solidly into Draco's chest, knocking the other wizard back half a dozen paces. Harry took an equal number of backward hops, gaining ground as he focused on the techniques needed to make the Animagus transformation.

Agonizing pain lanced through his temples, almost knocking him to his knees, and Harry gasped out at the feeling. A grey mist encroached around the edges of his vision, testament of just how close the pain was to overcoming him. Laughter reaching his ears caused Harry to look up --he had bent over and grasped at his head-- to see Draco looking contemptuously at him.

"Did you honestly think I wouldn't anticipate something like that, Potter?" Draco asked, letting his sword trace intricate patterns in the air. He spat to one side and regarded Harry scornfully, "I remember very well how you dealt with my dragons. Even with all the power and abilities being the Well of Shadows grants me... I'd rather not have to face down an overgrown fur ball with wings."

"An anti-Animagus ward," Harry concluded, reaching out with his senses through the dull ache that remained behind his eyes. Now that he was aware of it, Harry could feel the layers of magic creating the ward. Oddly enough, considering its creator, the newest ward to be applied to Hogwarts and its grounds was remarkably beautiful in its construction.

Uncountable threads of delicate black, grey, blue and purple shadows wound through the air and weaved around and between each other. It was a tapestry of unfamiliar magic that Harry could not decipher, but only appreciate for its elegant design. He was about to complement Draco on the beauty of his creation when he realized that the duel had already resumed.

Harry was barely able to escape being skewered by the lunge Draco performed. He twisted on his heel at the very last instance, the tip of the sword tearing at his robes. Jabbing his hands at the ground, Harry magically pushed himself into the air and high above the return stroke Malfoy had twisted into. Sailing over and across the lawn, Harry alighted only to be immediately set upon by Draco.

The strain of maintaining this battle was beginning to wear on Harry. He was utilizing a good portion of the Order's available power to boost his reflexes and speed, but was still barely able to keep himself ahead of Draco's relentless attacks. The pace was so fast that Harry not once found an opening to attempt any kind of retaliation, being forced to focus all of his attention solely on staying alive and try to lure Draco to the spot they wanted.

Harry, your foot movements...

Beowulf, who had been keenly watching the action, tried to warn him, but it was too late. Harry had

been immersed in an intricate dance around the flickering blade Draco was welding. Thus he had been too preoccupied with avoiding the sword, letting his attempts to shift out of the way be mostly reflexive, to notice that his rhythm was being disrupted.

His foot settled in just the wrong way at just the wrong time, as he was turning to avoid a downward slice from his left. His ankle twisted at an awkward angle and promptly caused a chain reaction that propelled Harry backwards and onto his side. He hit the ground rolling, feeling the icy cold of Draco's sword brushing against the back of his neck.

...leave something to be desired.

Dammit, I can't keep this up much longer! he replied, twisting and turning to avoid a quick series of jabs by Draco. Each one seemed to edge just a fraction closer to him than the last, heightening his desperation.

~But how can we fight someone - something that's literally made of shadows?~ asked Ginny, who was anxiously watching the fight from up on the ramparts. Harry could feel that it was taking all of her willpower not to abandon her position there and rush to his aid.

It's not as if you could simply light up a torch, responded Beowulf. **It takes a lot more than that to dispel such darkness as this.**

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Harry kicked out and smashed the heel of his right boot into Draco's left knee, causing the young man to stumble for a second. This was all he needed to gain the time he needed and gather the power required to supply one incredible burst of light. Even though it would only last a second, a fraction of a second, it would be enough (he hoped) to temporarily forestall Draco's advance.

As Draco righted himself, lifting his sword high above his head with both hands, Harry levelled his right hand at Draco's stomach. Grunting with effort he forced all the power he could manage, without turning himself into a charred cinder, through his fingers and unleashed a bolt of lightning, containing enough power to light London for a week, directly into his opponent.

Harry wasn't too sure about what exactly happened since the world vanished in a flash of brilliant white, followed by a concussive blast that lifted him up and slammed him back into the ground with enough force to break three of his ribs. The clap of thunder that accompanied his effort was deafening, not only to Harry but also to everyone else. He would later learn that people as far as fifty miles away had heard the explosive sound that blew Draco nearly fifty yards away from him.

He did not fully lose consciousness, but it took a great deal of effort before Harry could force his eyes to open. Gasping for breath, his entire body numb and aching painfully as the sensation of pins and needles suffused him, Harry rolled onto his side and struggled unsteadily onto his hands and knees. He looked around in a daze, his vision blurred and obscured by shimmering dots and squiggles of every colour he could imagine.

Pushing himself up and onto his feet, stumbling uncertainly as he fought to regain his equilibrium, Harry finally spotted Draco's stirring form. With a barely audible hiss through clenched teeth, Draco flipped himself onto his back and hopped nimbly onto his feet. He spun around to face Harry, teeth bared in a savage snarl. His chest was a smoking ruin of charred flesh, burnt deep enough to expose the white bone of his ribs with gleaming black and pulsating organs visible beneath them.

"Was that supposed to hurt?" he growled, his voice ringing deeply.

"Uh huh," nodded Harry, unable to do more than that at the moment.

Draco's savage grin grew broader, as fine strands of shadow played over his smouldering body. The darkness shifted and coiled over the gaping wound and, with a sickening wet noise, took on the shape and form required to heal Draco's injury. More threads of black slid over the freshly formed skin of his chest, replacing the fabric of his clothes that had been burned away by the lightning. With a testing flex of his shoulders Draco hissed, "Didn't."

Harry shook his head and groaned, *Oh, this cannot be happening.*

Now's not ze time to worry about zat, 'Arry, chided Joan, her accent thicker than normal as she gave vent to her own mounting concern over the situation.

Please, he pleaded, *please tell me this is all just a dream.*

~Harry?~ Ginny was calling for him, but he only heard her as if from a great distance.

This is a nightmare, he concluded. *I want to wake up.*

Biting down on his lip to suppress a scream of pain from the sharp pain that lanced through his chest, Harry forced himself to stand upright. He blinked rapidly and shook his head in an attempt to clear his vision. He squinted at Draco and dimly took in where the two of them were standing in relation to each other and everyone else.

Ginny call his name again, more urgently this time, *~Harry...~*

Now, Gin! he ordered, realizing that his impromptu lightning bolt had succeeded in knocking Draco into the position he had been so desperately trying to lure the Well to. *Do it now! Do it!*

~But you're too close!~ Ginny protested, *~You're practically on top of him. You could be caught--~*

Dammit, Gin, just set it off! This could be our only chance!

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He had known exactly what to expect. The memories of the Order's encounters with the Well of Shadows were storied in perfect detail. Harry and Ginny had spent hours analysing them and becoming familiar with the act of dispersing the Well. But, as in so many things, the reality proved to be a far cry from simple recollection.

Though he did not see it from his position on the ground, Harry knew that Ginny had directed a stream of precisely controlled energy towards a single point directly above where Draco was standing. The complex invisibility fields that shrouded the various working parts of the trap, hiding them from

Draco's attention, immediately fell away. Dozens of specially grown crystals hung suspended in the air, surrounding Draco from all angles, their sharpest points directed inwards at the Well. Lines of shimmering magic lanced out from the first crystal, the one Ginny had poured the Order's power into, intersecting with other crystals. In rapid succession the magic reflected from one crystal to the next, joining them to each other in an intricate network of glowing energy. The trap hung poised around Draco, who was casting puzzled looks at the iridescent web that caged him so unexpectedly. More beams of light began to emerge from the crystals, bouncing back and forth in a complex dance of mystical forces that grew more tightly interwoven as it progressed. Then one stream of energy struck inwards, impaling Draco through the chest. Instantly a hundred identical spears of light followed, the crystals which produced them beginning to glow brightly with barely contained power.

The atmosphere was electric, prickling the short hairs on the back of Harry's neck with the feeling of crackling power suffusing the area surrounding the trap. Backing away, he watched as Draco howled, in what was either pain or fury, as the multitudes of concentrated magic seemed to somehow swivel in place. The diffusion prisms came into place as the charged energy slid over their smooth planes, creating an uncountably greater number of magical beams which speared into the centre of the trap. The diffusion streams crisscrossed so tightly where they met that Draco disappeared from view, his shadowy form overwhelmed by the growing brightness. Harry tried to shield his eyes from the glare, only to find that he could see the outline of the bones in his hand. He turned his face away from the trap, feeling the pull as the magic permeating the region was drawn in, being used to boost the trap's energy beyond what Ginny and the Order had poured into it.

A deep, rumbling thrum began to sound, slowly rising in pitch, higher and higher. The multitudes of shimmering lines of force began to take on a principally bluish tinge, illuminating everything in a soft, dreamlike haze. As the intensity of the light dimmed, Harry glanced back to see Draco impaled by the intricate lattice blue beams. By now the sound emanating from the dispersal field he and Ginny had designed and created was a shrieking whistle, easily putting the Hogwarts Express to shame with its shrillness.

The sudden silence was shocking in its totality.

There was a shattering sound, like glass breaking, as the dozens of focusing crystals floating around Draco cracked. As the thick fractures ran through the facets, the crystals' blazing inner fires were instantly extinguished, the shimmering lines of energy emerging from their tips flickering out just as rapidly. Their task over and their internal magicks completely disrupted by the load they had been forced to carry, the crystals dropped. They shattered into tiny shards that lay scattered on the ground, like a sprinkling of diamond dust, sparkling under the blue light that still lit up the air above them. Now the diffusion prisms, set to hover closer to the ground than the crystals, twisted onto their sides, the light emanating from their slightly, but precisely curved planes shifting smoothly from blue into a deep red. Blood red, in fact, which gave Harry a moment's pause as he could not remember such an occurrence being part of any of the other times the Order had dispersed the Well of Shadows. Ultimately he ignored this deviation as being merely a result of initializing the trap in such a magically infused area as the Hogwarts grounds.

With a flare of mystical energy, rushing outwards like a nebulous wave of chilling black mist, the prisms went dark. The deep red glow that had illuminated the grounds slowly faded. Following behind the shadows that had been sucked out of the Well and thrown to the four winds, was a thick wall of soupy fog that quickly settled over the grounds, obscuring everything from view.

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Did it work? Harry asked squinting at the spot that had only moments earlier been a whirlpool of perfectly aligned forces. He blinked his eyes rapidly, trying to clear away the spots that obscured his vision. He could still see an afterimage of the bones in his hands, as well as the network of energy that had disrupted Draco's solidity and consequently his existence. Everything also retained a slightly reddish hue, which gave the slowly scattering fog a disconcerting pinkish tint.

~I think so~ replied Ginny, a bit uncertainly. *~It must have; since nothing's happened and we, and everything else for five miles, are still in one piece.~*

Harry laughed with relief and almost collapsed to the ground, but managed to keep himself upright. The biting cold of the cut to his shoulder made by Draco's sword was slowly beginning to fade, but the numbness of it still ran through the entire of his right arm. Massaging the aching limb, Harry decided to make his way to the centre of where the trap had once stood and see if anything of Draco had somehow survived the Well's dispersal.

"You dare... you... ha... ha..."

Harry paused and stared in complete consternation at the sight which greeted him. Standing in the centre of a small and shallow crater, surrounded by a fine mist that was rising up from the ground... was Draco.

And he was beginning to laugh.

"HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA!!!"

~I don't know about you~ remarked Ginny of the sight, which was now visible to those on the battlements as well, *~but I do not like the sound of that.~*

It didn't work? Why? What's happening?

****What has happened.**** answered Merlin, sounding very grave, ****is that the energy dispersal pattern was erroneous. Rather than scatter the Well's energies, the trap has amplified them.****

****In other words,**** explained Isis, ****he may have just become the most powerful being imaginable.****

Ginny's voice sounded a bit faint, almost what Harry would call shell-shocked, but with a heavy layer of sarcasm spread over it to hide her mounting fear. *~Oh... joy. Just what we've always wanted...~*

Draco shook himself off, just as a dog would get rid of water soaking its fur, and smiled at Harry with clear maliciousness. "That was hardly what I'd call sporting, Potter. Whatever happened to that damn fool Gryffindor honour and nobility?"

"Frankly I think it would be wasted on a monster like you," answered Harry.

"A monster? Moi?" Draco placed a hand over his chest, mimicking a fatal blow to his heart. He cackled with insane mirth and said with a flourish, "I may be a monster, Potter, but nothing you and your little Order can do will get rid of me any sooner, for I am as constant as the Northern Star, of which there is no match in all the heavens."

Harry arched both eyebrows, surprised that Draco would know anything about Shakespeare, who was a Muggle, let alone have read any of his plays. Still, he could not help but correct his opponent's slightly flawed quotation, "'Of whose true fix'd and resting quality there is no fellow in the firmament'."

**Now is not the time to taunt him, Harry...* * admonished Sun Tzu sternly.

What else can I do? He asked in return, a feeling of helplessness beginning to settle over him. The trap they had set was the only known way of dispersing a Well, besides simply waiting for it to fade away on its own.

Draco waved the correction aside and laughed again. Calming himself he looked straight into Harry's eyes, his black orbs virtually glowing with wicked intent. "What's the use of a good quotation if you can't change it a bit? That fact remains, Potter, that the world is but a stage. We're merely players... and it's time for you to exit stage left!"

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With even and measured steps, that were actually rather menacing, Draco began to approach Harry. His eyes remained firmly fixed on Harry, just as they had when he had drawn up to Lucius and subsequently butchered him. Harry tensed when Draco abruptly halted and threw both hands up into the air above him.

"YOU ARE GOING TO DIE, POTTER!! AND I WILL BE THE ONE TO KILL YOU!!" he roared, his voice accompanied by a sudden gale of ice-cold wind that swirled around them both. Debris from the path he had torn through the Forbidden Forest was kicked into the air, as rain once again began to fall from the low-lying clouds.

Lighting flashed across the sky as the shadows bordering the ruined forest rose up in waves that poised themselves just before that instant when they seemed about to break and come crashing down upon the two combatants. Draco's long black hair whipped around his face, buffeted by the strong wind and seeming almost alive in its movements. A demented smile played over the Well's face as he continued to shout.

"ALL WILL BE FORCED TO ACKNOWLEDGE ME AS YOUR EXECUTIONER!! ME!! DRACO MAL-" his voice faltered for a moment and a disbelieving expression flashed across Draco's face. He blinked in confusion, once, twice and then finished speaking in such a small voice that he sounded almost childlike, "-foy?"

And then, with only that as a warning, the world exploded.

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21. In the Valley of Death

As far as explosions went this one, Ginny felt, was... pretty big.

Truth be told it made the one where Harry had utterly destroyed number four Privet Drive look rather paltry by comparison. And that had been one bloody impressive explosion.

Smoke filled the air, thick and black, obscuring everything happening below from view. What little she could see did not fill Ginny with confidence. A massive crater, large enough to fit a dozen number four Privet Drives within it, scarred the once trim grounds. It abutted right up against the castle walls on one side, where the massive stone works were scorched black and even gutted and pitted in places. Even now, several minutes later, bits and pieces of debris and loose clumps of torn grass and dirt were falling intermittently from the sky - like exceptionally heavy and grotesque hailstones amidst the streaming rain. The rain itself was chill and fell hard upon those outside, stinging against them like a multitude of icy needles.

Despite the falling rain, which did little to help dampen the cloying smoke, Ginny could see dozens of small flickering fires burning on the grass around the edges of the smoking crater and along the border of the Forbidden Forest. Thick pillars of yet more smoke --grey instead of black-- were beginning to rise up from these, growing thicker and wider as the fires began to spread amongst the trees and underbrush.

The sight reminded Ginny horribly of when Hogsmeade had been attacked the previous Christmas.

The dancing red, orange and yellow glow of the fires lit up the gloom of this dark day much as the inferno, which had engulfed the village over a year before, had lit up the Christmas night sky. Despite the rain, which had been falling steadily since shortly after Ginny had activated the trap to disperse the Well, the fires continued to blaze and grow.

The acrid smell of damp, yet burning wood drifted in the air and stung at Ginny's eyes and throat. She blinked back tears as she turned away from the morbid sight, looking instead at her companions.

Dumbledore was possibly the only one that seemed unruffled by what had just transpired, his long silvery hair streaming down his back as it always did and his beard securely tucked into his belt. Aside from the fact that soot from the rising smoke stained his exposed cheeks, forehead and nose, and a dusting of ash, dirt and even some grass that lay sprinkled over his head, Dumbledore seemed to have barely even noticed that anything was going on.

Except for his eyes. Yes, Ginny could easily see the change in his eyes. Gone was the seemingly

permanent benevolence that had always seemed to reside there. Instead there was a cool, almost to the point of being cold, measuring look that seemed to gauge everything the old wizard saw with inscrutable purpose.

And power, Gods, the power radiating out from Dumbledore at that moment was incredible. Just to see him like this sent a shiver up and down Ginny's spine. This was not the headmaster of Hogwarts standing next to her. No, this was the wizard who had defeated Grindelwald over half a century ago. It was almost frightening, but at the same time gave Ginny a sense of assurance at the knowledge that if Harry could not be at her side, then at least Dumbledore was.

"Wow, Harry really toasted that bastard's arse!" commented one of the Aurors, a young witch called Siobhan. She was staring out over the wrecked lawns and forest with wide eyes, her hair tumbling around her in unruly tangles - a result of the pouring rain.

"I certainly hope he did," muttered Ginny under her breath, turning back to the grounds.

Dumbledore heard her and asked, his voice steady but with an almost imperceptible trace of concern buried in it, "You do not know?"

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Ginny shook her head and shielded her eyes from the rain with one hand, peering down to where the smoke-enshrouded crater lay. "It's still very cold, Albus," she said, her own worry momentarily overriding her usual reticence about using Dumbledore's given name. "If the Well's powers were properly dispersed, it wouldn't be. It would be getting noticeably warmer."

"What of the explosion we just witnessed?" he asked, nodding in that direction. "There was a... somewhat worrying delay, after the trap you and Harry utilized had finished, before poor Draco seemed to lose control of his energies."

"Do not call that bastard 'poor' in my hearing again, Albus," Ginny ground out, her inner turmoil causing her to momentarily forget herself. She started after a second and looked at Dumbledore with wide eyes and a horrified expression. She was about to apologise when the headmaster waved her comment aside, accepting her anxiousness over Harry's wellbeing.

"Is it over then?" asked Snape, who came up behind Dumbledore, with Idaho standing alongside him. Gravely Dumbledore shook his head and sighed slightly. "I'm afraid we have not yet been able to ascertain the final outcome of this battle. I believe it might take some time before we are able to get a clear view of what is transpiring --and what has transpired-- down on the grounds."

Suddenly, startling them a bit, Ron's disembodied voice announced, *"Actually we might be able to help with that. Not right now, but in a minute or two. Whatever Harry and Ginny did to Draco, it seems to have done the trick. Everything is slowly returning to normal."*

"Not that that means much around here," commented Hermione's voice. *"We're starting to get a clear view of Hogsmeade and what's left of the forest. The area around the castle is also starting to clear up."*

"Very good," acknowledged Dumbledore, a hint of his customary cheer returning to his voice. He wiped at his water clouded spectacles and instructed, "Prepare to raise the Situation Room and lower the shield barriers as soon as we have confirmation --either visual or via the map-- that the danger has indeed passed."

Ginny, however, had other concerns. "What about Harry?"

Ron's answer, however, was not helpful. *"Dunno, the Situation Map's still fuzzy in that spot. Whatever it was Malfoy did hasn't cleared up around there yet."*

"Can't you tell if he's all right, Ginny?" asked Hermione. *"Through your connection with the Order?"*

"I've been calling him, but there isn't any reply - I don't know if he can hear me," Ginny answered, looking back at the smouldering crater and the now widespread fires that were blazing through this area of the forest. The rain seemed to be easing up a bit, allowing the fire to grow without any hindrance. Looking over the damage incurred by the recent battle, she felt her lips draw into a thin line as she added, almost angrily, "And the Order have all retreated into the Great Hall to try and work out what happened to make the trap we set react the way it did."

Hermione's voice was puzzled. *"What d'you mean you've been 'calling him'? We haven't heard you say anything."*

Ginny looked around, seeing the many expectant faces watching and waiting for her reply. "Uh, I'll explain later... when fewer sets of ears are listening in."

"What about his aura, girl? Shouldn't you be able to 'feel' that?" asked Snape with his usual amount of bluntness.

"I can't make heads or tails out of what's going on down there," Ginny admitted, ignoring the Potions Master's tone. "That explosion had the same effect as dropping a small mountain in the lake - there's too many waves and ripples for me to see what's happening. I have to wait for things to settle down and that'll take a while."

"How long d'you think it'll take?" asked Ron, sounding surprisingly patient. *"From the look of it, at least where the Map's concerned, everything will have 'settled down' in five, ten minutes, tops."*

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Ginny opened her mouth to speak but was unexpectedly cut off by a sound that was as startling as it was unexpected. It rang, loud and strident, through the afternoon air, cutting through the diminishing rain with such piercing intensity that Ginny could feel her teeth shivering in response.

The blaring siren eventually trailed off, leaving her to snap her jaw shut and turn wide eyes to Professor Dumbledore, who looked across at her with a resurging graveness in his expression. He shared a look with her before turning to gaze out over the burning forest. Standing just behind the headmaster, one of the older Aurors, Halleck, also turned his eyes to where the burning ruins of the

Forbidden Forest stood.

"Looks like we have some more uninvited guests," he noted in a droll, but bland tone. The scar along his jaw twisted upwards in a manner that made his expression more of a grimace than the dour smile it was.

"Tom," spat Ginny, feeling the air crackle around her at the mention of Voldemort's true name. She became aware that she had unwittingly summoned upon the Order's power from the moment the alarm had sounded, gathering it to her for when she would leap into the forthcoming battle. With a vicious snarl she also rounded to face the forest, realization of Voldemort's plotting clear in her mind. "That son of a... it was a set up. He was using Draco to batter down our defences - take Harry out of the fight before it even started."

Dumbledore reach for his bracelet to address those in the Situation Room. "Mister Weasley, Miss Granger, how many Death Eaters are there?"

"Um... *how many does You-Know-Who have?*" asked Ron in a strange tone of voice. "'Cause I think he brought them all."

"Here they come now," announced Siobhan.

They emerged from the burning forest, through the smoke and flames, stretched out in a long line that reached from the edge of the lake, right around to the Quidditch Pitch. Dark shapes darted rapidly back and forth in the flickering shadows which fell across the grounds, while larger and ominous hulking forms lumbered out into the open.

A frightening wail rose up as rows of tall, thin and cloaked figures came forward, drifting over the ground like wraiths. Pale, bloodless faces seemed to hover amidst the inky black of their robes as they stood with inhuman stillness. Watching. Waiting. The firelight at their backs caused them to cast long shadows that stretched far ahead of them, almost to the foot of the castle walls.

Vampires. A shiver ran up Ginny's spine at the realization.

The shiver promptly ran back down her back and straight up again at the sight of what came next.

Marching out of the forest, in neat and coordinated ranks, were what could only be goblins. They tromped forwards, their ungainly gait not suited for such lengthy treks as they must have just made through the forest, and began to supplement the long lines of waiting vampires.

They were dressed in what was obviously traditional goblin armour and carried with them large rectangular shields (which were almost as large as they were) and wicked looking glaives that gleamed in the firelight. Despite the fact that their extraordinarily large ears stuck out from beneath their pointed helmets in an almost comedic fashion, the professional and serious way in which these goblins carried themselves betold of their profession as soldier for hire.

"Goblin mercenaries," muttered Idaho, looking very displeased. His brows were drawn together and he shared a concerned look with his second in command, Halleck. The pair did not look happy when they turned to watch as the remainder of Voldemort's followers drew into the open.

Lumbering trolls, twelve feet tall and with skin like an elephant's, were shuffling out of the forest at staggered intervals. Some dragged massive-looking clubs behind them, while others held large and unwieldy-looking spears by their shoulders. Perhaps more worrying than anything that had come before, were the groups of several trolls which were carrying long ladders, apparently in preparation of scaling the castle walls. The ladders were far too small for the trolls to use, but were perfect for either the vampires or the goblins.

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Last to emerge from the burning forest, some of them on fire themselves, were staggering bunches of the living dead. The zombies brought up the rear, primarily because of their slow and unsteady walk, shuffling aimlessly about and frequently bumping into each other. Several had clearly been unlucky enough to stumble against some of the burning trees and staggered about in jerky motions as walking pyres before eventually collapsing.

Behind them all, assembling on a small hill to one side of the bulk of the various dark creatures, were the Death Eaters. Their black robes fluttered in the light breeze and their pale masks were all in place. They stood in a tight knot, surrounding a single figure at the crest of the knoll they had gathered upon. Voldemort.

"According to the uh, counter thingy Harry set up, we're looking at three hundred and eighty one vampires; a hundred goblins; about the same number of trolls - various breeds; and three hundred zombies. I wonder where he found so many? Probably raided a nearby cemetery," said Ron, a quiet hush to his voice. Then he added, sounding almost chipper, "No bloody acromantulas, thank heavens."

"We have to get to Harry. Ron?" asked Ginny, looking away from the ranks of creatures standing by the edge of the forest and to the smoke-shrouded crater where she knew Harry to be.

There was silence for a moment as everyone waited. Finally Ron's voice answered, "Uh, the interference Malfoy caused has begun to clear up. We can see Harry... and Draco, unfortunately. If the Map's picking them up, then they're alive."

Ginny gripped at the wall overlooking the grounds, her nails digging into the unyielding stone until her knuckles went completely white. Ignoring the slight pain as her fingertips strained against the cold stone, she urgently ordered, "He's wearing a bracelet. Retrieve him now!"

"What about Malfoy?" asked Hermione, albeit sounding a bit reluctant.

"I don't give a damn about that misbegotten psychopath!" snapped Ginny, whirling to glare at those standing behind her, even though none had said anything. "Just get Harry back inside Hogwarts where he'll be safe! NOW!"

There was a tense moment of silence as everyone waited for Ron, or someone else in the Situation Room, to recall Harry to safety. After a while in which the quiet had stretched indeterminably,

Professor McGonagall's voice announced, "*It's not working. Either the bracelet was broken during the fight, or the anti-Portkey ward Mister Malfoy put up is still functioning. We'll keep trying to recover him, though.*"

Ginny nodded, though only those on the battlements could see her, and promptly declared, "Then I'm Apparating down there and fetching him before Tom and his lot find him."

"And what if you were somehow unable to return?" asked Dumbledore calmly, appearing completely unconcerned by the enemy forces massed below. He looked at her in that way he had, the one that always made her think of her grandparents, and said, "Being trapped would be dangerous. Just as dangerous as it would be if you and Harry were a normal couple."

"We're not normal?" she asked sarcastically.

Dumbledore almost chuckled but held it down, though his moustache did twitch. He shook his head and said, "Normal witches and wizards don't battle the forces of evil, Virginia. At least not as frequently and successfully as the pair of you seem to."

Ginny bobbed her head in acquiescence. "You do have a point." She then shook her head and said, "But it's not going to stop me."

"You can't go after Potter in the middle of a battle like this," protested Idaho.

"Want to bet?" she retorted, glaring at him.

One of the other Aurors, a grizzled old wizard called Thufir, stepped forward and began, "Perhaps it is not really my place to say anything--"

Ginny interrupted, her voice deceptively mild, "You're right. It's not."

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Dumbledore put a restraining hand on her shoulder, "I really don't know how to say this, Virginia..."

"Very carefully, Albus, because I think I already know what you're going to try and tell me." She turned to look into his sombre blue eyes, which peered at her over the rims of his spectacles. She smiled sadly and told him, "The answer is still no."

She looked out, towards where Voldemort and his Death Eaters were standing, her lips drawing into a thin line at the sight. Consciously working to unclench her jaw she said in a precise and clipped voice, "I'm going after Harry, even if it means I have to go through every Death Eater down there."

"That silly girl is going to get herself, and possibly Potter as well, killed," said Professor Snape angrily after Ginny had vanished from sight with a low pop.

"Virginia is the sort of person that takes things personally," Dumbledore observed gravely. "In my experience, she is less a believer in getting mad as she is an advocate for getting even."

Beside the headmaster, Halleck shook his head sadly and ran a thumb along the length of his scarred jawline. "Against all those Death Eaters, Vampires and what not... she doesn't have a prayer, poor lass."

Hermione's intangible voice responded staunchly, "*She has more power at the tips of her fingers than anybody alive, except perhaps for Harry. If there's anyone you should be worrying about, Gurney, it's the Death Eaters - if she thinks they might hurt Harry, Ginny won't hesitate to do whatever it takes to stop them.*"

The smallest glimmers of a smile lit up Dumbledore's eyes as he turned his attention down to the scarred grounds of Hogwarts, where Ginny had just appeared. He stroked at his rain-soaked and bedraggled beard as he considered her standing there. "If they only knew who they are about to face, I think that Voldemort's followers would be scared out of their wits."

Ginny stood facing the various creatures lining the edge of the burning forest for nearly a minute before anything happened. Apparently they were a bit surprised to be so openly challenged, especially by lone opponent - and a mere girl at that. Eventually, however, they managed to set aside their surprise and begin to move against her.

It can never be said that trolls are a particularly bright breed of creature, but they do have one thing going for them in matters of mental acumen. They do not think too much. Thus it was a large and rather obnoxious-looking troll that charged at Ginny first, his short and stumpy legs propelling him with surprising speed as he waved his large and heavy spiked club over his head. He looked oddly like a rampaging bull elephant, only without the trunk and large ears.

Without so much as a blink of an eye, Ginny levelled her wand at the troll in her most nonchalant manner. There was enough power behind that Stunning Spell to knock even Harry, in his Animagus form, unconscious. Suffice it to say, the troll never knew what hit it as it fell to the ground, knocking up a wide spray of mud before skidding to a halt.

Next came a squad of five goblins, their shields raised and their glaives held high. Ginny almost grinned as she turned her wand to them, gathering her power, "*Pyros Expellas!*"

Goblins have their own unique brand of magic, but even then they could not match the power put behind Ginny's spells by the Order of the Phoenix. A ring of blazing red fire encircled the group, trapping them within the bounds of its five-foot-high flames. The goblin leading the pack had not been able to screech to a halt quickly enough and ended up tumbling into the fiery wall in a tangle of limbs and armour. His companions hurriedly pulled him clear and smothered the flames covering him, only to find that their distraction had cost them any chance at escape as Ginny cast a flurry of Stunning Spells into their midst, dropping them as easily as she had the troll.

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Ginny smirked with satisfaction and turned to deal with the rest, only to find herself facing a lone vampire. It was tall and thin, wearing robes that were several centuries out of fashion, though

doubtless the style had been popular at the time of his turning. His fangs, which he bared in a grin as he drew nearer, were sharp and gleamed in a manner not unlike his shining eyes.

"*Lux Solaris!*" she cried, letting loose a burst of brilliant, almost blinding light from her wand. The vampire recoiled, hissing and cursing in pain as he stumbled back, covering his burnt eyes and smoking face. Ginny used this to her advantage and stepped close to him, within his defences, and reached out to slip the sword she had seen from its scabbard at his waist.

She quickly glanced at the blade and recognized it as a seventeenth century Venetian broadsword, probably also from when the vampire had been turned. It was heavier than she was used to and the balance was not as fine as the sword Harry had gifted her with the previous year, but the edge on its blade was keen. It would do.

And it did.

The vampire barely had time to register that his sword was no longer at his side. He looked up, dropping his hands away from his scalded face, blinking uncertainly with his injured eyes, and barely had time to open his mouth before Ginny slashed her borrowed weapon across his chest. She swept the blade in a upward arc, slicing a deep gash into his flesh, before swinging the sword back and down. The broadsword bit into the vampire's shoulder, rending muscle and bone almost down to his stomach. Gritting her teeth and pulling hard on the deeply embedded blade, Ginny tugged the sword free and spun on her feet, lashing out as she switched the sword from her one hand to the other. Both of the vampire's hands jerk upwards in a spastic motion as the blade cleaved through his neck and severed his head from his body. Flames erupted from and around the wound, rapidly engulfing the entire body in a blaze of fire, leaving behind nothing but glowing embers and a fine black ash.

Had anyone been close enough to see the smile stretching Ginny's face, they would have felt their hearts quicken at the sight. If they had been close enough to see the feral gleam in her bright eyes, they would have been greatly unnerved. And if any of those close enough to discern her expression were in the least bit familiar with Ginny Weasley and her fiery temperament, they would have turned tail and run as quickly as they could in the opposite direction.

For they would have realized that the look on Ginny's face was that of a person who was about to unleash forces beyond imagination, no doubt with great quantities of mayhem, destruction and death occurring all around her while she did so.

And that Ginny was perfectly happy about the idea.

Voldemort watched dispassionately as Ginny Weasley tore her way through the ranks of vampires, zombies and goblins, which were leading the assault on Hogwarts. His blood-red eyes took it all in as the young witch decimated those minions which approached her with almost brutal ferocity, using a mixture of spells and swordplay that none of those currently facing her could match.

Indeed, almost in spite of himself, the Dark Lord found himself impressed by the skills and --most especially-- the raw power she was exhibiting. But enough was enough, he decided after a minute or two. He did not bother to look at the Death Eater standing by his side when he gave the order that would sign the death warrant of this insolent girl that dared to try deny him his goal.

"Macnair."

Dammit, why couldn't I have Apparated closer to Harry? asked Ginny with mounting frustration as she swung her broadsword in a wide circle and lopped off the hand of one of the many zombies currently surrounding her. She ducked low and spun around, bringing her borrowed sword up to block a blow from a relatively 'young' vampire that had attempted to sneak up behind her.

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We told you, replied Quetz. **the Ether is too badly disrupted in that area at the moment. If you tried to Apparate there you'd simply slide around it or, worse, be reflected back.**

Apparating to where you did was almost as dangerous, added Miko. **You could have been splinched.**

Ducking under a slow swing by the now one-armed zombie, Ginny hewed its leg out from underneath it. As the mindless creature fell to the ground she managed to decapitate it as she rose up to parry another strike from the vampire, bringing her wand up in her free hand as she did.

"*Lux Solaris!*"

As the vampire howled and jerked back, Ginny plunged the blade of her sword through its chest and pierced its unbeating heart. With the blade firmly embedded, and knowing that simple metal would not be enough in this case, she transfigured the steel into wood. Instantly the vampire burst into a blaze of fire, jerking violently as it was consumed from within. Pulling the sword free and changing the blade back before it too caught alight, Ginny readied herself to face whatever would be coming at her next. She found him standing a dozen yards away, his hood thrown back and mask removed to reveal the unpleasant visage of his moustached face. He was clearly one of Voldemort's Death Eaters and looked rather familiar, though Ginny did not immediately recognise him. He had called off the various creatures trying to kill her, apparently intent on facing her alone.

He looks familiar. So does his aura.

I know, she agreed, *but I can't quite place...*

"You're good with that sword, girl. But these-" the Death Eater indicated the vampires, goblins and zombies that were backing away with a dismissive wave of his left hand, "-are hardly worthy foes. How would you care to test your mettle against a true fighter?"

"I recognise you. You're the executioner, Macnair." He nodded his head in confirmation. Ginny glanced down at his right arm, hanging at his side, and mentioned, "Harry cut your hand off last year."

Macnair's eyes narrowed to fine slits and he practically hissed, "Yessss... he did." Then his lips curled up in a wicked smile as he raised his right arm up so that the hand was clearly visible. His hand was a smooth and shiny silver, extending down almost to his elbow where it ended abruptly, rather like some kind of metallic glove. "But as you can see, my Lord rewarded my efforts with a suitable replacement."

Ginny narrowed her own eyes and contemplated his new appendage. She couldn't be sure --there was still a lot of inconsistency in the magic surrounding Hogwarts at the moment-- but Ginny sensed there was more to Macnair's silver hand than met the eye. Considering that it had been given to the man by Voldemort, it was a sure bet that there was something treacherous about it.

****Better be careful, Ginny,**** cautioned Beowulf. ****Can you feel it? Even with all the disruption caused by the Well's dispersal, we can still sense the vibrations that hand of his is giving off.**** *I feel it all right,* she agreed, lifting her sword arm up in mimicry of Macnair's own motion. *I guess we'll have to wait and see what he's got up his sleeve.*

"Then draw your weapon," she challenged, shifting her sword so that the light from the raging fire behind Macnair caught and flashed along the length of the blade.

"Foolish wench," sneered Macnair. He clenched his hand into a fist and, with a screech of tortured metal, the polished silver took on a liquid appearance and began to flow into a different shape. Ginny backed away a step or two as Macnair's hand swiftly reshaped itself into a gleaming double-edged battle axe. Holding it up for her inspection, he snarled, "my new hand *is* my weapon."

Ginny swallowed in an attempt to alleviate the sudden dryness in her mouth. *Somehow I wasn't expecting him to have something like that up his sleeve.*

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He came at her in much the same manner as he had gone after Harry during their brief duel the previous year. He *was* fast for a man his size, she had to admit that, and obviously he had some experience wielding an axe - although probably not one physically attached to his arm. But he was also rather ungainly in his movements and tended to overextend himself, always putting the entirety of his weight behind his swings.

She dodged one downward sweep with a nimble dive to one side, the axe missing her by only a matter of inches as she rolled clear. Then she was standing up, almost as quickly as she had dropped down, striking out to land a blow with her sword. Surprised by her response, Macnair was unable to back away fast enough to avoid the blade, the tip of which cut a shallow line across his chest. Hissing in pain he backed away and blocked Ginny's follow-up blow, snaring the sword's long blade with his axe and twisting it to one side so that her body was exposed to him.

****He's going to come in close,**** observed Heracles, ****inside your defences.****

Ginny twisted to deflect the punch aimed at her stomach by his left hand, pulling with all her might as she jerked back and tore her sword free. Spinning on a heel she used the movement to land a backhanded strike to Macnair's temple with the flat of the blade. Slightly off balance, mostly because of the speed with which she moved, Ginny was unable to hit with enough force to kill or knock him out but it was enough to cause him to stagger back several paces and reach up to hold his doubtless throbbing head.

Damn, she cursed silently, drawing deep breathes as she watched him closely. *I was hoping to end this fight with that.*

****According to Harry, and our own observations last year, his skull's probably solid rock,**** said Loki with untimely amusement. ****If you want him out of the fight, you should have used the sword's cutting edge.****

Ginny shook her head sharply. *I don't want to kill him, not if I can avoid it. Vampires and zombies are one thing, but killing a human...*

Sun Tzu's soft voice reached her. ****Then we'll have to devise an alternate method of removing him from your path.****

I'm always open to suggestions.

"You're good, I'll grant you that," Macnair admitted, reluctantly. He rubbed at his bruised temple before dropping his hand and raising his axe into a ready posture. "But I'm better."

"Maybe you're better, maybe you're not," Ginny granted, though she knew he would not be able to match her in a fair fight. She lowered her sword a fraction, drawing his attention to her right side and away from her left hand. "But there's one advantage I definitely have over you."

Macnair sneered at her, "And what might that be?"

Ginny smirked. "I cheat. *Wingardium Leviosa!*"

Macnair barely had time to comprehend her words, his eyes only just began to widen in shock, when the air around him burst into motion. Within moments he was caught up in a howling maelstrom of tightly bound air that literally swept him off his feet. Ginny had a brief glance at his horror-stricken face as he was blown nearly fifty yards across the lawn - crashing into a group of watching vampires and zombies.

Turning her attention to the swirling tornado she had brought into being, Ginny raised her left hand and the wand she was holding at the tunnel of wind and directed it down the long line of dark creatures laying siege to Hogwarts. Most of them were too distracted by the rain of spells, hexes and curses being fired down on them from the defenders up on the battlements, but even the dullest were quick to realize that they suddenly had more to worry about than trying to scale the castle walls.

With a wicked grin of satisfaction Ginny turned away from the havoc suddenly engulfing the lawn and returned her attention to her destination.

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Peter Pettigrew could not help but be amazed as he watched Ginny literally blow Macnair out of her way and resume her course for the still smoking crater not far from where Voldemort and his Death Eaters had assembled at the start of the siege. The rest of the Dark Lord's servants had long since dispersed to supervise the various dark creatures aiding them in Voldemort's attack on the castle, with the sole exception being Wormtail who remained by his side.

Nervously, knowing full well that his master would not be pleased with how easily Ginny had seemingly dispatched Macnair, Wormtail glanced up at Voldemort. The Dark Lord stood atop the low hill from which he had decided to direct the battle, and was closely watching every move the young red-haired witch was making.

"She fights impressively, if futilely," Voldemort eventually said, his red eyes following Ginny's progress as she continued on her way.

"She does seem skilled in using a sword," Pettigrew offered in timid agreement.

Voldemort gave a contemptuous snort. "A *sword*. Bah. Such a primitive tool is no match against a true sorcerer and his magic. If she thinks she can triumph that way then she's a fool."

Pettigrew cringed and tried to sound deferential as he said, "But to summon up a whirlwind like that, such a large one too, means she must be powerful in magicks as well."

"If you believe that some *girl-child* could hope to match me, then you too are a fool," Voldemort growled, turning his lidded red eyes to Peter with a dangerous gleam flickering within them. "And I do not suffer fools lightly in my presence, Wormtail. Remember that."

"Yes, my Lord," Pettigrew immediately responded contritely, dropping his head in as respectful a manner as he could manage. He fought unsuccessfully to repress the shudder that wracked his body at Voldemort's words. He knew, even without any elaboration on Voldemort's part, that he would be punished for his imprudent words.

Sometimes he wished he had made a different choice in the past.

Ginny launched herself at the knot of five goblin mercenaries that currently barred her way to the smouldering crater where Harry lay. The fires raging through the Forbidden Forest had grown and spread wide, joining together to become a massive blaze that lit up the battlefield with a lurid light. Highlighted in shades of red, orange and yellow, Ginny seemed a veritable angel of death, cutting through the ranks of Voldemort's minions with unmatched fury.

She leapt into the air, splitting a shield and biting into the nearest goblin's side with her sword as she landed in their midst. A spray of chain mail and blood splattered those nearest to them and provided her enough of a distraction to roll between them and emerge from their ranks without injury. As they spun around to face her, their armour hindering their movements, Ginny raised her sword at them and channelled the Order's power through its steel blade.

"*Razor Bindus!*" she exclaimed, a web of razor-edged wire shooting from tip of her sword and ensnaring the four remaining goblins before they could fully turn to face them. As the wire wrapped itself around them and bound them together Ginny cast a simple Banishing Charm to knock them off their feet and to the ground.

Nicely done, complimented Merlin, before asking, **d'you feel that?**

A chill ran up Ginny's spine as a distressing crawling sensation swept over her senses, causing her to suck in a breath. Ignoring the fallen goblins she turned to face the source of the black tendrils of magic that were intruding on the edges of her perception. Licking her lips, because she instinctively knew the source of this horrible unease, Ginny turned to face the man --the thing-- who had haunted her nights ever since her first year at Hogwarts.

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"Impressive. Most impressive," the thin figure said, standing imperiously on the small hillock he had been directing his forces from. Somehow she had wandered close enough in his direction that he had decided to deal with her himself, his snakelike face peering both intently and curiously at her from within the drawn cowl of his robes. Reaching up with both hands he pulled the hood back and exposed his face fully as he asked, "And who might you be, girl, to dare face Lord Voldemort?"

"*Ginny, get out of there,*" urged Ron's voice, speaking to her from the Situation Room beneath Hogwarts, where he was doubtless watching Ginny battle her way to Harry. Clearly he had seen who it was that was confronting her. "*Apparate back into the castle. Please!*"

I think it would be wise of you to heed your brother's suggestion, agreed Sun.

Ginny angrily shook her head and tossed the Venetian Broadsword she had been using away, knowing that she would not be using it in this battle. If she needed it later she would summon it from where it had fallen. In the meanwhile, she turned her attention fully towards Voldemort.

"My name's Virginia Weasley," she told him, her voice raise loud and clear so that he could not fail to hear everything she said. Switching her wand from her left to her right hand, so that she would be using the hand she was most comfortable with, Ginny gripped it tight and declared, "And I'm here to kick your arse, Tom Riddle."

For a moment Voldemort's eyes narrowed and flashed dangerously, his ire clearly roused by her usage of his given name. For a moment Ginny felt sure that he would attack her without thinking, but then he threw his head back and, of all things, laughed. Ginny was sure that Voldemort's demented cackle would be enough to unnerve even the devil. Then she remembered, *Wait a second... Tom is the devil.* Once his laughter died down, Voldemort looked at her with a cruel smile and said, "You have fire in you girl. I like that. I'll have to kill you for it, slowly, but I like it all the same."

He's underestimating you. Now is the time to strike him unawares, advised Osiris.

****In other words,**** added Heracles, ****kick his arse!****

I know the perfect spell to do just that, agreed Ginny. Looking straight into Voldemort's red eyes she levelled her wand at him and replied caustically, "Fire's not all I have, you slimy bastard."

With a sharp crack that echoed loudly over the muted roar of the fire blazing through the forest, a bolt of lightning slammed into Voldemort's chest. The streams of brilliant red, crimson, scarlet and ruby lifted the pale man into the air and knocked him back a dozen paces to fall to the scorched ground, his robes smoking at the point of contact.

Ginny lowered her wand and quickly glanced around, checking that none of Voldemort's minions or Death Eaters were coming to his aid. Satisfied that she could focus the bulk of her attention on the Dark Lord, she turned back to Voldemort and relaxed slightly as she decided to wait for him to recover before resuming her attack against him.

****Do not let yourself become distracted, Virginia,**** cautioned Merlin gravely. ****Put this need for revenge you are feeling aside. Press your advantage while you can.****

Merlin, she answered, *stay out of this.*

****Ginny...****

Rolling over and stumbling unsteadily onto his feet, Voldemort glared across at her and hissed angrily as he drew his wand from within his charred robes. Ginny incautiously folded her arms and smirked at him in satisfaction. She spoke with a smug assurance, her voice laden with scorn and ridicule, "What's the matter, Tom? Kneazle got your tongue?"

Voldemort stared at her, clearly furious, and straightened. "You caught me by surprise, girl."

"If you thought that was a shock," she told him confidently, "wait till I'm done with you."

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"I have been guilty of overconfidence before," admitted Voldemort, walking forward until he was once again standing on the crest of the low-lying hill he had been standing on earlier. He held his wand up and directed it at her. "Rest assured that it will not happen again."

****Hopefully that'll be because he'll be dead and thus unable to make the same mistake twice.****
With any luck.

With exaggerated formality Ginny assumed a classic duelling stance. "Care to duel, Tom? Or are you afraid I'll beat you... just like Harry did."

Voldemort bared his sharp teeth and hissed, "If you persist in calling me that, girl, I will make you suffer greatly before I kill you."

****E is getting worked up,**** observed Joan. ****Angry. You'd best be careful.****

If he's becoming angry then he'll also become careless.

****Yes,**** agreed Alexander, ****but his anger makes him that much more dangerous as well.****

Don't worry, I can deal with him.

"Why shouldn't I call you by your name, Tom?" Ginny asked in a polite, mocking, tone. She wagged her wand and looked expectantly at him before elaborating, "After all, we were on a first-name basis for almost an entire year."

Recognition seemed to come to him then as Voldemort's eyes widened a fraction before narrowing into thin slits. He considered her closely for a long moment before speaking. "So, you are her... the girl Lucius gave my diary to. I thought the name sounded familiar."

Ginny nodded and began to gather the Order's power, preparing to strike once this conversation came to an end, which she knew would be soon. "Yes, I'm the one your twisted diary used to open the Chamber of Secrets," she admitted, gritting her teeth in barely restrained anger as she lifted her wand and aimed right between Voldemort's reptilian eyes, "and now I'm going to make you pay for it."

"There is something about you, girl," mused Voldemort, not bothering to take up a ready stance for the duel, which surprised Ginny. He reached up and stroked his chin with the tip of his wand as he continued, "Something that is missing. Something very important. Something called *fear*."

"That might be because I am afraid of nothing," she responded boldly.

"Is that so?" asked Voldemort. With casual ease he glanced behind her, looking over her shoulder and letting his thin lips curl up a fraction, as he added offhandedly, "Then my allies' presence should not bother you."

Unwilling to turn, since this was obviously the old trick in the book, Ginny did not let her attention stray from her opponent. This proved to be a mistake. Too late did she feel a sudden chill wash over her, one that reached deep within her and began dredging up those memories she had tried her best to bury and forget.

Dear Tom, I think I'm losing my memory. There are rooster feathers all over my robes and I can't remember how they got there.

Ginny's throat constricted until she could barely breathe as the all-consuming cold enveloped her within its grasp. She clenched at her wand and spun around, cursing herself for her stupidity as she moved.

Dear Tom, I can't remember what I did on the night of Halloween, but a cat was attacked and I've got paint all down my front.

They were almost right on top of her. A pair of Dementors; standing tall, thin and menacing in their hooded black robes, were less than a handful of feet from her. They stood on either side of a man she instantly recognised, by his silver hand, as none other than Peter Pettigrew. Wormtail. Her desire for revenge on Voldemort had blinded her to his approach and the fact that he had apparently led the Dementors to her.

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There was another attack today and I don't know where I was. Tom, what am I going to do? I think I'm

going mad... I think I'm the one attacking everyone, Tom!

Biting down on her lip hard enough to draw blood, Ginny snapped her wand up as the Dementors reached out with their frail looking arms. Sucking in a deep breath, struggling against the resurging memories of her time under Tom Riddle's control, Ginny gasped out the only spell that could protect her.

"Expecto Patronum!"

A brilliant golden figure exploded from the tip of her wand, right in the laps of the Dementors coming at her. It was a young wizard on a broomstick, a Firebolt, and dressed in the Quidditch robes and gear of a Seeker. Buzzing around him were a dozen tiny Golden Snitches, glowing like miniature suns as they and the Seeker tackled the Dementors.

Almost immediately, as the pair of dark creatures were torn apart and exploded into dark blue flames, the immense cold began to dissipate. Ginny sucked in another deep breath, almost a sob, this one of relief, and felt her shoulders relax as her unpleasant memories began to fade away. Continuing to breathe in ragged gasps, she looked up and glared at the man who had spent over a decade living with her family and felt a blazing surge of pure hatred ignite within her.

"Pyrokallis!"

The exclamation behind her was the only warning Ginny had before the spell, which she recognised as one that created a small but powerful ball of fire, hit her between her shoulder blades. As she collapsed to the ground, an agonized scream torn from her lips, Ginny realized that she had once again been a fool and done something so unbelievably stupid that she almost deserved this.

She had turned her back on Voldemort.

Rolling onto her back, in a desperate attempt to smother the flames burning across her back where her robes had caught fire, Ginny found herself looking up at Voldemort. Through the haze of burning pain that seemed to penetrate straight through her body, from the middle of her back to between her breasts, Ginny could make out his pale face that seemed to hang suspended above her, surrounded by black. He was looking down at her with contempt written in his sharp features.

"I've enjoyed our little tête-à-tête, girl," he said, bringing his wand up and aiming it at her heaving chest, "but it is now time for you to die. Slowly and in great pain, as I promised you earlier."

The pain in her back was beginning to dull, but not enough to grant her the clarity of mind she needed to properly access the Order's power. As it was Ginny's thoughts were too foggy and jumbled for her to make out what the various members of the Order were saying. She shook her head in an attempt to clear her muddled mind, but found that this only served to cause more pain to lance through her body. A noise to one side caught Ginny's ear and she glanced to see that Macnair, looking very beaten and dishevelled, was staggering unsteadily towards them. As he approached she saw him change the silver axe attached to his right arm back into a silver hand. He stopped a short distance away and dropped to his knees, bowing low before Voldemort and entreating, "Forgive me, My Lord, I--"

"Shut up, Macnair," snapped Voldemort, his eyes never once leaving Ginny. He did not really need to keep such a close watch on her --Ginny was too busy struggling against the pain consuming her and remaining conscious to attempt to flee-- but he was obviously taking his earlier lesson to heart on not succumbing to any overconfidence. He inclined his bald head a fraction and ordered, "Wormtail, bind her tightly. I do not wish her to escape her fate."

Wormtail came up to stand at his master's side. He pointed his silver hand at Ginny, much as a Muggle might point their hand in imitation of a gun, and said in a high-pitched and squeaky voice,

"Binduscorpus."

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Thick brown ropes wrapped around Ginny, trapping her arms next to her body and biting painfully tight across the blistered skin of her back. She bit down hard on the inside of her cheek in a desperate bid to hold back another cry of pain, aware that such a display of vulnerability would only spur her captors on. Ignoring the blood that pooled in her mouth as her teeth tore through the tender flesh Ginny struggled as best she could against her bonds. Voldemort examined her as she thrashed about, checking that the ropes restraining her were secure. Finally he nodded with approval and lowered his wand from its guarding position.

"Excellent," he assessed, his approval causing Wormtail to heave a quiet sigh of relief. Voldemort ignored the short man and turned to one side, bending over to pick up something lying at Ginny's side. He lifted the object up, revealing that he now held Ginny's wand in his hand. He made a short show of displaying it to her as she fought to free herself. He then proceeded to snap it in half with a quick and deft twist of his hands, pausing for a moment as a surge of magic rushed out of the broken wand from its core.

Dropping the two halves of Ginny's wand to the ground, dismissing them as being completely insignificant to him, Voldemort turned to where Macnair was still kneeling. He considered the man, who was trembling almost imperceptibly with dread, for a moment before he commanded, "I will deal with your failure later, Macnair. In the meantime; go and find Potter's body - then bring me his head." As the prostrate Death Eater hurried to stand, Voldemort turned his gaze back to Ginny and lifted his wand once again. With a malicious smirk twisting his mouth he looked Ginny over and shook his head a fraction, as if mildly disgusted by the ease of his victory of her.

"CRUCIO!"

And Ginny's world vanished under a barrage of unmatchable pain.

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22. Hogwarts Under Siege

Cold.

Penetrating to the very core of his being.
So cold.

Not far from the besieged Hogwarts, a man and a woman watched events unfold, the latter with a bit less patience than her husband.

"Now?"

"No. A little longer."

Dumbledore looked on with dismay as Voldemort began cursing Ginny Weasley. Up until a few minutes earlier the headmaster had been almost convinced that she would accomplish her goal of recovering Harry and returning safely to the castle. But before she could reach him, Voldemort had stepped before her and, for reasons he had hoped she would resist, Ginny had turned to face him. Before succumbing to her desire for revenge Ginny had been proceeding magnificently. Dumbledore had been following her progress closely for the passed year or two, ever since she had started to grow closer to Harry. If anything her prowess on the battlefield against the various vampires, zombies, trolls, goblins and Death Eaters was beyond his expectations. Even Snape had been impressed and, considering the Potions Master's animosity towards Ginny, that was saying something.

Now, however, she had fallen to a ruse of the Dark Lord's and was writhing on the ground in an agony Dumbledore had hoped she --and all the rest of his students-- would never experience. With a monumental sigh he reached for the slender bracelet encircling his wrist and called upon the school's deputy headmistress.

"Minerva, have you had any lucky contacting Mister Potter yet?"

"I'm afraid not, Professor," came McGonagall's prompt reply. "Either he is too badly injured to reply or his bracelet has, as the Muggles would say, 'shorted out'."

Hermione Granger's voice added, "He might not be hurt, just unconscious."

Dumbledore turned away from the scene transpiring on the grounds, wanting to focus all of his attention on finding some way to help the two students --three if you included Draco-- trapped below.

"I pray that is the case, Miss Granger. Unfortunately we still cannot make out any details through the smoke and debris."

"Forget bloody Harry for a moment, will you?!" snapped Ron Weasley's intangible voice, his anxiety clearly audible. He sounded quite frantic as he urged, "We have to get my sister away from that monster!"

"Patience lad, we're working on it," replied Halleck, his eyes not straying from where Ginny was been tortured by Voldemort.

Ron's retort was succinct. "Work faster, then."

Professor Snape hissed angrily and snapped, "Be quiet, Weasley. Your asinine comments are not helping the situation."

"Please, both of you," said Dumbledore, cutting off the argument before it could develop more fully. He sighed minutely and leaned back against the stone rampart. "Now is not the time for such arguments. Rest assured, Ronald, that we are doing our best."

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"Just hurry, sir. Please," pleaded Ron.

Before he could provide any further comfort, another Auror hurried over to where the headmaster stood. Thufir Hawat, an old and grizzled-looking wizard, came to a rest next to Idaho and Halleck, pressing at a stitch in his side. After he caught his breath, Hawat reported unhappily, "They're resuming their assault. Apparently the spectacle is over."

Idaho, who had not turned from watching Voldemort torture Ginny, asked calmly, "Where?"

"Everywhere," answered Hawat. "All along the walls facing out to the forest."

"Severus? Anything we should know?" asked Dumbledore, directing everyone's attention to the brooding Potions Master.

Snape shook his head. "Not much. You-Know-Who has always been particular about not including me in any of the details regarding his plans for attacking the school."

Hermione asked, "Why's that? I mean, Professor, I thought having seen you push Harry off the Astronomy Tower last year had convinced him you were loyal."

"Severus?" prompted Dumbledore when Snape did not immediately answer.

"He does trust me - within limits," admitted Snape. Clearly he was displeased to make the admission as he unconsciously clenched his hands into fists. "But not enough to risk the possibility that his enemies might somehow trick me into revealing his plans."

"He's learning," remarked Hawat knowingly. The senior Auror, who had a great deal of experience under his belt dating from Voldemort's first rise to power, waved a hand to indicate the grounds and everything happening around them. "You-Know-Who definitely wasn't so tactically sound in his actions during his previous reign of terror."

Snape sneered faintly and noted, "He's had a long time to think."

"We, on the other hand, don't have nearly as much time," said Halleck, standing stolidly at Idaho's side. His features were drawn into a grim mask. "The girl won't last much longer, I fear."

"Virginia is strong-willed enough to resist Voldemort's torture long enough for us to at least make the attempt to free her," Dumbledore maintained, pushing off from his resting place and looking out over the grounds once again.

"How?" asked Idaho, running a weary hand through his thick black hair. "Unless something's

happened that the rest of us aren't aware of, the anti-Apparation wards around Hogwarts are still up. The same for Malfoy's anti-Portkey ward. We can't go down to mount a rescue."

It was Ron's pressing voice that supplied an answer, albeit a daring one. "Not unless we lower the Shield Barriers."

"Which is out of the question, you imbecile boy!" barked Snape after everyone had stood for a moment while the suggestion sank in. "That would be opening the school for all of You-Know-Who's forces to storm inside."

Dumbledore, however, nodded thoughtfully and said, "The idea has merit."

Snape rounded on the headmaster, disbelief etched on his face. "WHAT?!"

"Excuse me, Auror Idaho?" interrupted Hermione's voice before anything more could be said.

Idaho sighed and answered, "We're a little busy right now, Miss Granger."

Hermione persisted, "I know that, but I thought you should know that You-Know-Who seems to be concentrating a large number of the remaining goblins by the North Tower. There's quite a few trolls with siege ladders heading that way as well."

"He must be planning to scale the walls there," said Halleck.

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"Or else it might be a diversion," suggested Hawat, who had a tendency of seeing plans within plans within plans wherever he looked. He was, after all, of the same generation of Aurors as Alastor Moody. "Forcing us to spread our troops thin in an attempt to protect against a feint and thus opening us up to assault elsewhere."

"Either way, we can't risk it," decided Idaho crisply. He reached for his bracelet and called, "Hayes, do you hear me?"

A soft but firm female voice quickly replied, "Yes, sir."

Idaho gazed down the length of Hogwarts' battlements. "You-Know-Who's moving his mercenaries against the North Tower. I want you to take Hunter, Sterling and Dickson to reinforce Fokker's squad."

"Understood."

"Now that that's taken care of can we get back to the important stuff?" asked Ron impatiently. His voice rose with each word until he was all but shouting. "Like rescuing my sister before You-Know-Who kills her?!"

"Please, Ronald, try to calm yourself," Dumbledore said. He looked pensively to where Ginny was lying, Voldemort and one of his Death Eaters standing on either side of her. For the moment it seemed that she had been released from the Cruciatus Curse, probably so that Voldemort could be sure she heard him as he gloated.

Dumbledore frowned a bit as he considered Ron's earlier suggestion that they lower the school's shields. After looking at the idea from several angles he asked, "Miss Granger, it is my understanding that one of the modifications Harry and Virginia made to Hogwarts' defences is the ability to lower individual sections of the shield barriers."

Hermione's voice was puzzled, but she answered promptly enough, "That's right."

Dumbledore nodded, pleased, and continued, "Then, would it not be possible to create an opening on the far side of the castle from Voldemort's forces, say by the lake?"

"And once the rescue party is outside we can seal it up again, yes!" finished Hermione, quickly working out what the headmaster had in mind.

"I have a spot that would be perfect, headmaster," announced McGonagall after several seconds of silence descended over those assembled.

With the faintest traces of a smile curling his lips Dumbledore turned to where Idaho was nodding thoughtfully, mulling over the idea, and said, "Then, Duncan, might I suggest you assemble a team. I think it best they be volunteers."

Idaho snorted and half laughed. "I think I'd better choose them myself. If I asked for volunteers to mount a rescue for Harry and Ginny, practically every Auror I have would step forward."

"True. The two of them do tend to endear themselves to others, don't they?" agreed Dumbledore amiably, ignoring a disparaging mutter from Snape. He waited a moment, allowing everyone to fully commit themselves to the plan, before adding in an offhand manner, "I, of course, will be accompanying your Aurors."

"Headmaster!"

"Albus!"

"Sir, I must protest!"

"Have you lost your senses?!"

Stifling a chuckle Dumbledore looked into Idaho's startled eyes and said in his firmest voice, which he usually reserved for recalcitrant students, "I might no longer be a spring chicken, nor am I as spry as I was in my youth, but I am the greatest asset you have in this battle, Duncan. And no, Severus, I have not taken leave of my senses. At least, not yet."

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Idaho shook his head. "But, sir, that's precisely the reason we need to keep you here on the walls with the rest of us. My people can handle You-Know-Who's lot if they can sneak through the edge of the forest and use the element of surprise. I'm not going to allow you to put yourself in unnecessary danger."

"And if I have decided that it is, as you put it, necessary?" asked Dumbledore quietly.

"Regardless, you are of greater strategic value than Miss Weasley," countered Hawat, stepping forward. "In the scheme of things she is less important than-"

Ron's voice, loud, angry and indignant, interrupted him. "MY SISTER IS NOT LESS IMPORTANT

THAN ANYBODY, YOU BLOODY OLD-"

"Ron!" exclaimed Hermione, clearly attempting to calm the upset young man.

"This is why we should never have allowed Potter and his friends to act in such capacities," declared Snape scathingly. "Regardless of their knowledge, experience or whatever, they're nothing but children that are currently getting in the way and hindering our-"

"Severus. Thufir." Dumbledore raised his hands in a plea for quiet. When they had all stilled and waiting for him to speak he continued, "Select your team, Duncan, and have them assemble in the Great Hall. I will meet them there."

Idaho was clearly reluctant to permit it but seemed to realize that he had no other recourse available to him. Ducking his head in resignation he nodded his acquiescence. "I... very well, Headmaster."

Returning the head Auror's nod with one of his own, one of gratitude, Dumbledore turned to start making his way down to the Great Hall. Snape, he knew, wanted to follow him but instead remained with the Aurors and other teachers arrayed along the battlements. His position as a spy among the Death Eaters was too important to risk jeopardising himself by being seen actively helping in the recovery of Harry and Ginny.

When he was half way down the winding staircase he had taken, Ron's voice quietly spoke up. The fiery-tempered Weasley --as were the entire family-- sounded a bit apprehensive. "Professor Dumbledore?"

"Yes, Mister Weasley?" he asked, not pausing in his stride.

"I'm sorry if I spoke out of turn, sir."

"It is perfectly understandable, Ronald. Do not fret over it."

"Yes, Professor." There was a brief pause before Ron added, sounding very much relieved and also grateful, "Sir? Thank you. For going after her."

The headmaster smiled tiredly, "I can do nothing less."

He was nearly at the bottom of the stairs when he heard McGonagall's worried voice calling him over the bracelet on his wrist, "Albus? Are you sure this is a good idea? You going out with the Aurors?"

Dumbledore smiled roguishly this time and had to repress a laugh as he replied, with as good humour as he could muster, all things considered.

"Not really, Minerva, though I suppose there's only one way to find out."

Loud.

Piercing, shrieking and throbbing around him.

So loud.

A short distance away from the battle husband and wife continued to watch, the witch steadily becoming less willing to wait.

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"Now?"

"No. When the time is right."

Ron was well on his way to having his sixth heart attack of the day. Maybe his seventh, as he had long since lost count. The cause for the young wizard's anxious state of mind was the fact that his sister, as well as his best friend, were both currently stuck in the middle of an extensive battle being waged on Hogwarts' doorstep. Harry was thus far 'Missing In Action' as Hermione had put it, while Ginny was suffering under You-Know-Who's malicious attentions.

The Situation Map, which dominated the Practical Fighting Techniques auditorium, was at the moment scaled to display everything within three quarters of a mile of the school. Working on the comprehensive suggestions Ron had compiled the last time Hogwarts had been attacked, the map was projecting fully three dimensional images of everything that was happening - which Hermione had said was called homeopathics or something similar.

At the moment, as his girlfriend came up beside him, Ron was standing over the part of the map representing the Lake. A ghostly image of the giant squid (about the size of his hand) appeared to be drifting near the heel of his left shoe.

"Are you sure you know what you have to do?" Hermione asked.

"Haven't the foggiest," he admitted, watching as a group of four cave trolls tried to lift a siege ladder against the school's wall. Professor Sinistra and a pair of Aurors managed to hold them off with an array of hexes and curses.

Hermione made a surprised noise and exclaimed, "That's not very reassuring!"

Ron shrugged before turning away from the miniature battlefield sprawled at his feet. "Sorry, but we've never had a chance to test this. Harry and I talked about it when he was going through the renovations with me, but it was purely theoretical."

"Mister Weasley?" Duncan Idaho's disembodied voice suddenly spoke up. "We're starting to encounter stiff opposition from the creatures trying to scale the walls. I think now's the time to bring the school's active defences into play."

"They're inside the outer perimeter defences," noted Hermione, "so there's no need to activate those."

"You'd better give your people some warning, sir," Ron said, walking to the desk Harry and Ginny shared to one side of the Situation Map. He picked up the thick book that was lying on it and began leafing through it. "Having the wall defences switch on all of a sudden might startle some of them."

"I'll pass the word along. Let us know when you're ready."

Professor McGonagall nodded and spoke briskly as she monitored the battle waging above them,

"We'll begin once Professor Dumbledore and your Aurors are in position. That way the defences will act as a distraction when they leave the safety of the school and attempt to rescue Miss Weasley and Mister Potter."

Halleck's voice reported, "My squad and I are on our way to the Great Hall as you speak, Professor. From there it will be a short walk to the exit you suggested."

"We will be waiting for your call then," McGonagall told him.

"At least we know the defences work," Hermione muttered as she and McGonagall joined Ron by the desk.

Ron glanced up from reading the instruction manual and asked, "We do?"

Hermione looked at Ron as if that was the stupidest thing she had ever heard him ask in all the years they had known each other. "Of course we do," she told him confidently, before pausing for a moment.

She looked at him uncertainly and asked, "Don't we?"

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"Harry and Ginny say the defences work, but I've never seen them in action," Ron explained wearily. He resumed paging through the thick manual. "We haven't exactly had an invading army to test them on before now."

Pain.

Echoing through his mind and body... her pain.

It hurt.

Made him... angry?

It hurt him.

It hurt her.

Yes... angry.

Angry.

"Now?"

"You know we can't. We have to wait until it happens."

Hilary looked unhappily at her husband and ran both hands through her golden hair in agitation. She gazed out over the battlefield to where Voldemort and Wormtail stood victorious over Ginny's limp body. "If we wait much longer, Tom's going to melt my brain."

Gregory shook his head and placed a calming hand on his wife's shoulder. Turning his eyes to where Ginny lay trapped, Voldemort starting up another round of the Cruciatus Curse, he sighed and offered what comfort he could. "Don't worry, love. He'll be stopping to gloat again soon."

"Yippee," was her dry response. "Watch as I try to contain my enthusiasm."

"Foolish girl, did you honestly think you could defeat me?"

Ginny collapsed limply in the thick mud, her entire body quivering in the aftermath of the Cruciatus Curse that Voldemort had just subjected her to. She wanted to move, desperately wanted to drag herself away from here, but the ropes binding her were too firm and too strong for her feeble struggles. Bitter tears stung her eyes as Ginny looked up to see Voldemort seemingly towering over her, Wormtail standing a pace or two behind him, his thin lipped mouth twisted in a haughty parody of a smile.

Struggling to catch her breath, her throat was raw from screaming, Ginny could not find the strength to do anything but watch as the Dark Lord raked his burning red eyes up and down her tightly bound body. Had it been anyone else, one of his Death Eaters perhaps, Ginny would have expected him to be ogling her with lecherous intent. Voldemort, however, was simply observing her with a cool, dispassionate interest - as if she were no more than a passing curiosity. Somehow that did not make her feel any better.

"Your power and abilities are great, I will not deny that," he admitted, his voice sounding silky smooth while he considered her. But then his eyes narrowed as he stood straighter and declared conceitedly, "But I am the greatest sorcerer that has ever lived! The battle between us was over before it even began."

"Y-yuh - you're not," Ginny managed to pant out, glaring up at him while she lay helpless on her side. Even with all the aches and remembered pain that currently suffused her, she was somehow able to convey her own burning hatred for this... thing.

"Not what, girl?" snapped Voldemort.

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"Not the greatest sorcerer that's ever lived," answered Ginny, breathing fast. She knew that her words would incense him, and braced herself for the expected outcome. The smile had disappeared from Voldemort's thin face, vanishing so quickly it seemed almost as if it had never been there in the first place, to be replaced by a look of pure fury.

"Crucio!" he hissed, jabbing his wand at Ginny.

The pain rolled over her like a blanket, beyond anything she had imagined or felt before today. Ginny had heard about the horrors of the Cruciatus Curse from her parents, her teachers, the various members of the Order as well as from Harry (who had first experienced it during the third task of the Triwizard Tournament). She had believed, deep down inside herself, that after being joined to Harry and becoming bonded to the power of the Order, that she would be able to endure the worst the curse had to offer. She had quickly discovered, however, that she had never been more mistaken about anything. None of what she had heard could possibly do justice to the sheer agony of it.

It seemed to last forever, though in reality Ginny knew it was probably only a few seconds. Then, with an abruptness that was almost painful in itself, the pain shrieking through her came to an end, leaving her shaking helplessly on the ground. Blinking back the tears and trying her utmost to ignore the throbbing that permeated her body, Ginny rolled onto her side and glared up at Voldemort, her teeth bared in a silent snarl.

Do you have to bait him like this? asked Miko, her voice sounding flat as if Ginny's ears were stopped up with a thick syrup.

Yes. Oh, god it hurts.

Then don't bait him. ordered Merlin sternly. ***If you can regain enough focus to Apparate-***

Ginny interrupted him, stating flatly, I'm not abandoning Harry.

Swallowing repeatedly in an attempt to alleviate the harsh dryness of her throat, Ginny focused on Voldemort at sneered as best she could. She tried to laugh, or at least chuckle --even though there was nothing remotely amusing about her situation-- but ended up coughing instead as she continued to taunt him, "T-the truth hurts... doesn't it, Tom?"

"I shall make you beg my forgiveness for suggesting that," Voldemort declared, raising his wand for another round.

"Not while there is breath left in my body," answered Ginny, already beginning to shiver in fear of the pain she knew was coming.

Voldemort sneered at her and spat out his words, "That can be arranged. But it shall not happen quickly. Crucio!"

It was unbelievable, the pain that enveloped Ginny. Dimly she tried to process the feeling of it, but it was too much to take in and what little she could make out was a mass of conflicting sensation that hurt almost as much as the actual pain. It was sharp, but at the same time blunt. It was scalding hot, but also freezing cold. Loud, but soft.

At the edge of her perception, through the clamour of her own screams, Ginny heard a sick, wet popping noise that coincided with the curse's almost climactic end. Moments later, as she lay limp and quivering, Ginny felt the warm rush of blood filling her mouth. Gagging on the sharp, metallic taste, she unconsciously probed with her tongue and found the source of the bleeding. During her convulsions she had bitten straight through her lower lip.

Ginny? Your nervous system can't take much more of this.

Shield. Ginny's thoughts were in disarray from the pain which continued to batter her even after the curse had been lifted. Choking on blood she began to cough and rolled onto her side, hunching up as her stomach began to twist and heave in on itself.

Dimly she was aware of a soft female voice. ***You have to focus. Focus.***

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It hurts, was all she could manage to think. It was certainly all she could feel.

We're trying to repair the damage and mute the pain, but this is the Cruciatus Curse we're dealing with, Romulus' concerned voice told her. There was a brief pause, then, ***We need you to focus yourself against it if we're going to have any hope of deflecting the brunt of it.***

Ginny nodded, though the action sent further spikes of pain lancing through her head, and managed a weak, I'll try... but everything's hurting so much...

Isis tried to help her. ***Concentrate on our voices then. Use the techniques we taught you.***

Nodding once more in confirmation, Ginny turned onto her side. Her eyes were swimming in a mixture of tears and blood, so she could see very little of what was happening above and around her. She focused instead on what was being said, despite the fact that her ears were ringing almost as badly as her eyes were watering.

"Wormtail," she heard Voldemort address his servant. She could dimly make out Voldemort's dark form standing over her, Wormtail shuffling quickly to his side. "You used to live with this one's family, didn't you?"

We should've killed him, she thought maliciously, her attention centring with uncanny precision on the shorter wizard. The pain she felt seemed to bleed away as her mind focused on Wormtail and her knowledge of his treachery. Harry should've killed him.

Virginia...

It's his fault, the words curdled angrily as she struggled, and failed, to push herself up onto her elbows.

Pettigrew was standing, almost cowering, but Voldemort's side. He spoke in a tremulous voice, his hands rubbing uneasily over each other as he nodded vigorously, "Y-yes, my lord. Yes. I did."

Ginny felt her lips part in a silent snarl, All his fault...

Focus, Ginny! Don't lose your focus! ordered Heracles desperately, fully aware that they were losing her attention.

Listen to our voices, Virginia-

Voldemort motioned Pettigrew towards Ginny with a gesture of his wand. "Then reinforce your loyalty to me and punish her for her presumption."

Pettigrew swallowed once before bowing deeply. "Yes, m-my lord."

"Harry's only ever made one mistake in his life," Ginny remarked after spitting out a mouthful of blood. She wished she could wipe at her chin, but settled for staring up at Pettigrew as he came closer, her eyes fixed on his pallid face.

"Indeed," remarked Voldemort, his curiosity piqued. "And what might that have been, girl?"

It's all his fault! Ginny spat out another mouthful of blood - directly on Pettigrew's mud-covered boots. She glared up at him and snarled bitterly, "He spared your treacherous life when he should've let Moony and Padfoot kill you!"

Pettigrew jabbed his silver hand at Ginny and screeched, "Crucio!"

This time the pain was not as bad as when Voldemort cast the curse, since Pettigrew was not as powerful a wizard, but it was still an agony beyond words or description. Ginny could feel her spine creaking and straining as she arched up against the pain, leaving her to fall to the ground with a thud when it finally ended.

For pity's sake, Ginny, you have to stop this! insisted Heracles, almost begging her.

The damage will be beyond our ability to repair otherwise, concurred Osiris, sounding very concerned.

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Ginny was wheezing for breath, but managed to look up at Pettigrew. She could see that the man was clearly shaken and immediately took advantage of that. "My, how... courageous of you... Scabbers," she muttered between pants. "Torturing a helpless girl. Good work, keep it up. Who knows, at this rate you'll be just like him--" she motioned at Voldemort "--before you know it."

"No, I - I - Crucio!" Pettigrew stuttered in protest before renewing the curse.

Again the excruciating pain wracked Ginny, perhaps just a trifle more intense than before. This time, however, Pettigrew maintained the curse for what seemed like an eternity longer than the first time. When he finally lifted the curse Ginny lay panting on the ground, a dull throbbing permeating every pore as Ginny trembled with relief.

Wracked with coughs from her raw and burning throat, Ginny tried to resume her denunciation of Pettigrew, but saw instead that Voldemort had waved the fretful Death Eater back. He had a truly evil smile of satisfaction as he once again levelled his wand at her. "And now, you insolent brat, I will have the pleasure of--"

"Expellias!!" shouted Ginny urgently, gathering what magic she could in desperation to evade any further torture by the Dark Lord. She drew the magic into her body, a process that under these conditions was nearly as painful as the Cruciatus Curse, and then expelled it with all her available might in every direction.

The bonds holding her captive snapped easily under the force of the hastily cast and directed Banishing Charm. Ginny gasped a deep and relieved breath as the ropes slewed away from her body and allowed her to breathe without constraint. The spell itself continued to balloon outward in all directions as Ginny rolled onto her stomach and, her arms and legs trembling under the strain, pushed herself to her feet.

Voldemort, who had been knocked back half a dozen paces by the expanding Banishing Charm before it had faded, stared at her in astonishment. "What?! But her wand--"

It was Pettigrew, who had not been knocked as far back by the spell as it had mostly dissipated before reaching him, that stepped forward with his silver hand outstretched in an attempt to subdue Ginny before she could do anything. "Stupe--"

To those watching, Ginny's movements, limited and restrained though they were, were little more than a blur. Her fist, swung in a short backhand, smashed into Pettigrew's jaw with a resounding crunch that knocked the short man to the muddy ground in a senseless heap. This victory was not without a price, however, and Ginny almost doubled over from the pain that seemed to radiate from her heart and lungs.

Good girl! encouraged Merlin as she struggled to compartmentalize the pain and push to the back of her mind where she could more easily ignore it.

Hold them off for a few more seconds and we'll be able to Apparate you to safety, Alexander told her, sounding very relieved to Ginny's ears.

Ginny whirled, staggering only slightly on unsteady and tremulous legs, to face Voldemort. She stretched her right hand towards him, clutching at her middle with her left, and hissed his name through clenched teeth, "Tom!"

The Dark Lord watched dispassionately as Ginny summoned up a bolt of lightning that would have reduced even the greatest of trees to kindling. The writhing whip of ruby energy snapped between the two of them with a resounding crack that threatened to shatter glass and heat intense enough to dry the mud caking both their robes. Ginny had been able to blow Voldemort off his feet when she had previously used this approach.

Unfortunately Ginny was still too shaky from the many Cruciatus Curses she had been subjected to, to consider that her opponent might this time be prepared for such an assault. The lightning came to an abrupt and startling end less than a yard from where Voldemort was standing, flaring white and screeching loudly against the invisible barrier he had erected around himself.

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"Fool me once, shame on you," Voldemort observed unpleasantly when, after several long seconds, Ginny dropped her arm to her side and ended the barrage of crimson and scarlet force. She stood there, panting from her exertions, and not fully comprehending what had happened. With a sardonic smile Voldemort flicked his wand at her feet. "Fool me twice, shame on me."

The ground exploded up from underneath where Ginny was standing, sweeping her up in a maelstrom of uprooted earth, stones and one or two reasonably large rocks. It was like being caught up in an avalanche, only in reverse. The force of the magically created upheaval was enough to briefly lift Ginny into the air before slamming her back down amidst a rain of debris.

After all the torture, as well as her previous injuries, this was too much for the young witch. Ginny had only just had enough strength in her limbs, which felt leaden when she tried to move, to keep herself standing upright. Under such an intense and concentrated assault her reserves were nigh useless. So, as the spell drew to a close, Ginny collapsed in a manner not unlike a puppet that had its strings severed.

Lying prone in the upturned dirt and mud, Ginny remained completely motionless. What little energy she had managed to dredge up to throw off her bonds had been exhausted, leaving her at Voldemort's mercy (not that such a thing existed) yet again. She ignored the urgent chatter and pleas of the Order, wondering instead how it was she managed to remain awake. Unconsciousness held a certain appeal at the moment.

"You try my patience, girl, and I shall have you suffer for it," she heard Voldemort saying. She was too tired to roll onto her back and face him, but a sharp kick to her side managed to knock Ginny over. Breathing shallowly she looked up at Voldemort with glassy eyes as he aimed his wand directly over her heart. "Cruc-"

Voldemort's utterance of the curse was abruptly cut off by the sound of the world coming to an end, or something pretty close to it. It was a loud rumbling thunder, combined with the noise of an avalanche grinding forward. Following right on its heels was a seething red, white and golden wave of magical energy. It washed over Ginny, Voldemort and everyone else on the grounds as it rapidly swept outwards, leaving a strange tingling sensation in its wake.

As the blazing light encompassed her hazy vision, forcing Ginny to shut her eyes against its glare, she suddenly felt the anti-Animagus and anti-Portkey wards that Draco had created earlier come crashing down. Heck, they did not just come down; they were torn apart like wet tissue paper, broken into a thousand pieces and shattered into nothingness, as though they had never been there at all.

The deep roar of thunder that had sounded quickly began to fade, allowing another deep, guttural roar to be heard. It was a sound that Ginny recognised instantly. It was a roar of release, an exultation of freedom, a challenge against all opposition and a signal of hope to those who, until a moment ago, had been lost in despair.

As the war cry echoed throughout the hills and valleys surrounding Hogwarts, the only Imperial Arch Griffin known to exist lowered his leonine head, tucked his outstretched wings behind his back, shook out his thick mane and glared across the battle-scarred field. His glowing emerald eyes narrowed, blazing with righteous, unchecked fury. His lips parted in a snarl, revealing his gleaming golden teeth. His hands clenched into tight fists and then unclenched, foot long talons glittering coldly under some undefined source of light.

Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived, was awake.

And he looked decidedly pissed off.

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23. Volley'd and Thunder'd

For a very long moment all of the assembled Death Eaters, and other minions stood staring with slack jaws and wide eyes at the unbelievably massive creature that towered in their midst. Ginny, from where she lay in the mud, watched with mixed relief, hope and amusement as the Griffin focused its brilliant green eyes on her. The two dark wizards standing over her seemed frozen in place, both left speechless at the sight. Finally, Voldemort seemed to regain the use of his thin-lipped mouth.

"Harry Potter," he snarled, reaching down with one bony hand to grab Ginny by her throat. With unnatural ease he lifted her up and callously tossed her to Pettigrew, who was barely able to catch her in his arms in time. Voldemort glared across the torn and scorched lawn and, in a tone of voice that could give people nightmares, loudly demanded, "Surrender, boy, or the girl will be the first to die this day."

The Griffin opened its jaws wide and unleashed a roar that turned knees into jelly.

"I think you've managed to piss him off," Ginny noted with a smirk, struggling feebly in Pettigrew's less-than-secure grip. Her entire body was aching with the dull after-effects of the many Cruciatus Curses that had been placed upon her. She was also battered, bruised and --in the case of her back-- rather burnt.

"Master," Pettigrew hesitantly began to speak, "perhaps it would be prudent for us to fall back.

Regroup inside the forest--"

Voldemort angrily waved for his servant to be quiet, his eyes not leaving the hulking form of the Griffin that was glaring daggers at him. He hissed sharply, "Shut up, Pettigrew, you coward! You are the most spineless creature I have ever known!"

Ginny managed a small chuckle, finally managing to get her feet underneath her and stand more or less upright. Pettigrew shifted as she moved and brought his trembling silver right hand up, so that it was clasped lightly around her throat. Ginny ignored the slight pressure and said in a voice dripping with sarcasm, "Good help is so hard to find these days, isn't it, Tom?"

Dumbledore was creeping cautiously along the footpath leading around the lake. Following behind him were the half dozen Aurors who were accompanying him in his attempt to recover Ginny Weasley and Harry Potter from the battlefield that had once been Hogwarts' grounds. Glancing over his shoulder after a particularly deafening roar from the Imperial Arch Griffin, the headmaster silently assessed his comrades.

With the exception of their superior, the battle-scarred Gurney Halleck who was bringing up the rear, the five Aurors were all fairly young - as far as witches as wizards went. All of them had, at one time or another, been students at Hogwarts and were thus familiar to Dumbledore.

Right behind him was Will Masen, an athletic young wizard that had been especially good in both Herbology and Potions. Next was the slim, platinum blonde figure of Josella Playton, who was a few years younger. Jenny Paige had been a schoolmate of Bill Weasley and just as redheaded, as was her younger sister, Lisa, who was now in her fourth year. Close behind Jenny was Bryce Hammond, who

in counterpoint to the others' anxious faces, appeared almost bored with all that was happening around them. Last before Halleck was Tal Whitman, a handsome black man with a muscular build that was offset by his relaxed demeanour.

All-in-all a fairly well-rounded group, Dumbledore thought, turning his attention back to the path.

With a bit of luck, we should be able to pull this off.

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" came an unexpected whisper from Halleck, who had quietly moved up the line to join the headmaster in the lead.

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"Of course not," declared Dumbledore in a hushed voice. He smiled faintly and added with a small amount of black humour, "If I were, it would most likely be doomed to fail before we even got started."

A subdued, but rapidly rising in volume, mutter was being carried through the air by the communication aspect of the Portkey bracelets everyone on the team wore. Dumbledore listened, with his typical benevolence and some bemusement, to Ron's anxious voice.

"What if this doesn't work? What if something goes wrong? What if--"

"For pity's sake, Ron, calm down!" interrupted Hermione briskly. *"The only person down here that's allowed to panic at the moment is me!"*

The headmaster was prevented from further listening to the conversation when Halleck tapped him on the shoulder and directed his attention across the grounds. There, standing in the middle of a ragged and still smoking crater, loomed the hulking form of Harry's Animagus. The almost glowing white furred and feathered Griffin was hunkered down in a low crouch, his flaming emerald coloured eyes glaring a promise of imminent death to where Voldemort and the shivering Peter Pettigrew stood. Dumbledore watched and listened keenly as Voldemort shouted at Harry, threatening Ginny's life if he did not immediately surrender. The Dark Lord's demands seemed to reach the young Animagus, as a flicker of shimmering magic surrounded the Griffin and the massive creature transformed back into the tall and lean figure of Harry Potter.

The various Aurors taking part in the rescue operation had crowded around Dumbledore and Halleck, observing what was transpiring with interest. Tal Whitman, crouched down next to the professor, shook his head in wonder and asked, "What the blazes is Potter doing?"

"I believe he is preparing to look his opponent straight in the eye," answered Dumbledore, his eyes fixed on where Harry was standing defiantly.

"He's going to look You-Know-Who in the eye?" asked Halleck incredulously. As Tal had done only moments before, Gurney shook his head and declared, "The boy's mad."

Dumbledore smiled reassuringly. "Do not worry, Harry knows what he's doing."

Jenny Paige, on Dumbledore's other side, chuckled humourlessly. "Who's worried?"

"It is almost time to move. Get ready," was all Dumbledore said. He knew, from prior experience with both Harry and Voldemort, that the two opponents would not waste much time with meaningless banter and would soon be launching curses and spells through the air. He reached for his bracelet and spoke. "Remember, Minerva, do not activate the defences until the time is right."

"How will we know when that is, Albus?" asked Professor McGonagall.

"I suspect it will be fairly obvious."

"Ha - nk G - -u're o - ay! Ca - hea - ?"

Ron's voice, relayed from the bracelet dangling around Harry's slender wrist, was broken and so badly distorted that the Boy Who Lived could not make heads or tails of whatever it was his friend was saying. Clearly the backlash from the dispersal of the Well of Shadows, coupled with Malfoy's proximity to Harry at the time, had damaged the device - leaving Harry incommunicado for the remainder of the battle.

Having returned to his natural form, Harry slowly made his way to the edge of the crater, moving in the direction where Ginny was being held. His eyes jumped from her to Voldemort to Wormtail and back in rapid succession, the sight causing his jaw to clench painfully in barely repressed anger. He had clearly missed most of the fight, but Ginny's cries of pain had roused him back to wakefulness just in time to see Voldemort batter her down in preparation for another application of the Cruciatus Curse. This, coupled with the Order's summary of the battle before, had raised Harry's temper to dangerous heights.

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"Harry, I am so delighted that you've finally joined us."

Harry let his eyes slide over to Voldemort and he bared his teeth in a silent snarl as he took in the appearance of his nemesis. The snake-faced man was paler than he remembered and the front of his robes were scorched and blackened, but the smug superiority in his gleaming red eyes had not changed in the slightest.

Biting down the urge to immediately start hurling curses --preferably lethal ones-- Harry dredged up a smile and observed as casually as he could manage, "Let me guess, the truce is over."

"More than that, Harry," Voldemort declared flamboyantly. "It is over, undone, nullified, negated, invalidated, abolished--"

"I get the idea, Voldemort," Harry interrupted, unwilling to waste time listening to Voldemort recite that particular page of the thesaurus.

Voldemort did not appear too put out by Harry's abruptness and quickly struck at the heart of the matter. With a wave in Ginny's direction, where she was still being held in the grip of Wormtail, he demanded, "Surrender yourself to me, Harry, and I shall spare her life."

Harry smirked in disbelief. "Somehow I doubt that."

"So you'd rather have me kill her?" asked Voldemort, looking mildly surprised at Harry's response.

"I have a counterproposal," Harry offered.

If he had eyebrows Voldemort would have surely raised them. "Really?"

"Let her go and get off Hogwarts grounds immediately..." declared Harry, his tone completely without inflection, "and I won't kill you and all your Death Eaters where you stand."

Voldemort may not have been able to arch any eyebrows, but he did blink in astonishment. He stood there, on the slight bluff he, Ginny and Wormtail were standing on, and spent several seconds staring. Quickly gathering himself once again he shot Harry a calculating look and scoffed, "You're bluffing." Harry responded blandly, "Am I?"

"You're not a killer, Harry. You know that just as well as I do," Voldemort proclaimed, sounding as though his statement were one that Harry should be ashamed of.

"Are you so sure about that?" challenged Harry, still keeping his voice and face bland and utterly devoid of any emotion or expression. This time Voldemort was clearly unnerved by how Harry was conducting himself and Harry took the time to silently call out, *Ginny*.

Ginny, struggling feebly in Wormtail's grip, stilled for a moment, *~Harry?~*

Harry had to fight down a sigh of relief. Instead he continued to match gazes with Voldemort, while trying to reassure Ginny as best he could. *Hold on, Gin. I'm coming for you.*

~Just be careful...~ was her reply as she resumed her nearly exhausted efforts to free herself from Wormtail.

Have you ever known me to be otherwise?

All the time. put in Loki's sly voice.

Harry restrained a groan as Heracles added, **It's practically your trademark; getting into trouble.**

His attention immediately snapped back to Voldemort as the dark wizard drew himself as high as he could and proclaimed, "This is the last chance I give you, Harry."

"You do *not* know who you're going up against, Voldemort," asserted Harry calmly.

"Quite the contrary, Harry," countered Voldemort snidely. He motioned the various Death Eaters, vampires, zombies, goblins and trolls that were milling about to attention. Stretching out his arm he pointed a thin and bony finger at Harry and ordered, "Get him. Alive, if possible. If not... I will understand."

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Although the Death Eaters showed an understandable amount of reluctance to advance on where Harry was standing --after all he *was* the Boy Who Lived for a reason-- the other dark creatures were not as hesitant. In fact, to Harry's mild surprise, most of Voldemort's minions turned away from their task of besieging Hogwarts and began to march towards him.

The bulk of Harry's adversaries, from what he could tell by reading their auras, were vampires. He watched silently as they slowly approached him, affecting a look of utter nonchalance as they drew steadily nearer and he began to get a clearer idea of their numbers.

I don't like being in the presence of so many corpses, he finally decided as a dozen or so vampires abruptly surged ahead of their fellows.

Corpses? What are you going on about? asked Merlin in some confusion. **Aside from some zombies and vampires --who were dead to begin with-- nobody's been killed.**

Harry nodded as he saw a half dozen other vampires detach from the main group to his left and begin to circle around him. *Yet*.

Merlin's voice sounded alarmed as he began, **Harry...**

Ginny's in danger, Harry cut him and the other members of the Order off before they could begin to protest properly. He narrowed his eyes as he turned his watchful gaze away from the approaching vampires and to where his girlfriend stood. *Nothing else matters beyond that*.

Returning his attention to the large group of vampires that were now circling around him like a school of waiting sharks, Harry did a quick head count. Ordinarily the number of undead that currently surrounded him would have given Harry a moment's pause. Instead, his concern for Ginny overriding everything else, he looked to the one vampire that was standing still - clearly the eldest and the leader of this particular brood.

Raising his eyebrows a fraction Harry observed mildly, "Thirty to one."

"We like to come prepared," smirked the vampire, whose platinum blonde hair put Harry slightly in mind of Draco Malfoy - whose inert body lay somewhere behind him.

"My instructors have always said that the best way to cope with being outnumbered is to get a bigger stick," replied Harry, retaining his calm. He glanced casually behind the smug vampire, at the steadily burning remains of the Forbidden Forest. The flames were leaping high into the air and, under the still dark and tempestuous sky, casting long and dancing shadows all around.

With only a slight twitch at the corner of his mouth, Harry gathered the Order's magic to him and directed it towards the blaze. The crackle of the flames was interrupted by loud cracks of wood splintering, catching the attention of everyone watching. Covered in a layer of flames, one of the massive trees that the Well of Shadows had up heaved during his approach to Hogwarts, rose slowly and steadily up into the air.

Harry allowed himself a thin smile as the blonde vampire turned back to gape at him. He stretched out with the power once again and began plucking and tearing the extra branches off the floating tree trunk, rounding its shape off into a rough log. Even with the trimming he was making, the log was still a good fifty or sixty yards long and thicker than he was tall. Harry's smile grew steadily with each crack of a branch being torn away.

"Well, guess what?"

With remarkable speed, moving faster than one could expect for such a large object, the burning tree trunk rolled into motion. Hovering between two and three feet of the ground the blazing log skimmed over the upturned grounds and smashed squarely into the onlookers. Bodies were knocked through the air as if they were nothing more than rag dolls, while screams of surprise, shock and terror sounded as the burning log mowed its way across the lawn.

Harry chuckled under his breath and, once the blonde vampire turned his stunned attention back to him, smiled as evilly and wickedly as he could manage.

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"My stick is bigger than your stick."

Ginny could feel herself grinning in much the same way as the Cheshire Cat would. Both Voldemort and Pettigrew were watching as Harry decisively and systematically worked his way towards the low rise they were standing upon. While the Dark Lord stood rigid with his hands clenched into fists, Pettigrew was shifting nervously from one foot to the other. She found their aghast expressions most satisfying.

"This should prove entertaining," she quipped, causing Voldemort to whirl at her with a venomous glare contorting his narrow features. Despite herself Ginny cringed, thinking that he was about to hurl a curse (probably Cruciatius) in an attempt to shut her up. Fate, however, chose this moment to intervene in a most spectacular manner.

"*Stupefy!*"

The sudden cry of the Stunning Spell, uttered simultaneously from seven mouths, distracted Voldemort from Ginny. He pushed past her and Pettigrew, staring in disbelief at the sight which greeted him.

"What in Slytherin's name?"

"It's Dumbledore!" declared Pettigrew.

Voldemort glowered dangerously, baring his small and pointy teeth, and hissed, "I can see that, you bumbling twit."

Indeed, Dumbledore, with Gurney Halleck and five other Aurors whom Ginny did not immediately recognise charging alongside him, had entered the fray. They were approaching from the direction of the lake, which was where the Dark Lord's forces were spread their thinnest. Ginny watched with an overwhelming sense of relief as the headmaster felled a trio of cave trolls with a single spell as he and his companions began working their way toward them.

Ginny could see that Voldemort was about to order those of his minions which were not matching off against Harry to deal with this latest threat. He managed to open his mouth to speak, but before he could utter a single word a series of loud explosions rocked the already ravaged and upturned grounds.

The defences, Ginny realized, looking up at the castle walls.

Coinciding with Dumbledore's charge, Ron or whoever was in charge of the Situation Room, had triggered the active defences that Harry had installed around Hogwarts during the previous year. All along the walls of the school, garnering varying degrees of surprise from those Aurors and teachers arrayed there, the masonry was coming alive.

Stone gargoyles were shifting about on their precarious perches and, with seemingly demented grins on their faces, were raising their hands high above their heads to gather and hurl balls of flickering azure fire at the intruding throng below. The brilliant blue flames smashed into the ground, or occasionally a group of zombies, exploding on impact with an astonishing amount of force.

At the base of the towering walls arrays of long and thick iron spikes burst outward and upwards, impaling those few zombies and trolls that were still beating against the stonework in gruesome sprays of blood and gore. A similar set of spikes emerged higher up, this time slanting down so that none of the attackers could attempt to scale the walls without encountering even further resistance.

"Why is it that Gryffindors always believe hopeless gestures are noble ones?" asked Voldemort in an aggravated tone of voice. He was seemingly ignoring the fact that almost a third of his forces had been done away with since the battle had been joined. His teeth still bared in a silent snarl he motioned to Pettigrew, "Wormtail... kill her."

"Killing me isn't going to help you one bit, Tom," Ginny protested weakly.

"Perhaps not, but it will most certainly *shut you up* once and for all."

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****Brace yourself, Virginia.****

Ginny, who had just resumed her apparently futile struggles against Pettigrew's less than secure grip, paused. She continued to put up a slight token resistance, far less than what she was truly capable of, regardless of her injuries, and silently asked, *For what?*

Sun Tzu's voice was tinged with both concern and amusement. ****We're about to transfer you to a safer clime.****

"I'm sorry, Ginny. Please, don't take this personally," Pettigrew was saying, shifting about to take a firmer hold around her neck with his ordinary left hand.

"I really don't see how I could take it any other way, Scabbers." Ginny wheezed as he clutched his hand tightly over her throat. "And if it was at all possible, I'd rather not 'take it' at all."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean for it to turn out this way," he muttered in a low voice, clearly not wanting Voldemort to overhear what he was admitting. Fortunately, however, the Dark Lord was too busy watching with mounting anger as the defenders up on the castle walls joined in with the now animated gargoyles and started hurled curses and hexes down upon the attackers. Ginny, despite her precarious

position, was slightly surprised by the tremulous and regretful tone Pettigrew's voice had taken as he almost whispered, "I never did."

Any second now...

If all goes as planned, Joan assured her, **when Wormtail 'ere begins focusing 'is magic through 'is 'and, we'll be making some big waves in ze ether.**

And if all doesn't go as planned?

Did you make out that will, as we suggested?

Ginny swallowed nervously, *I thought you were joking...*

Pettigrew reaffirmed his grip on her throat with his normal hand, while at the same time bringing his gleaming silver right hand up in front of them both. Ginny continued to struggle a small amount, not wanting to alert the treacherous man to her impending escape by suddenly ceasing to prove recalcitrant. Turning her head to the side, as much as she could against the grip he had on her, Ginny glared venomously into his watery eyes.

"I hope you rot in hell."

"I rather expect I shall," Pettigrew agreed, surprising her slightly with this candid admission. But, any further opportunity to speak was abruptly halted as, amidst the fire and chaos of the battle being waged, Pettigrew set his face into a mask of grim determination. Sucking in a deep and slightly tremulous breath, he began to speak the Killing Curse. "Avada--"

Ginny recognised the signs, as she was subjected to them, immediately. It was almost identical to normal Apparation, the way the world rapidly faded to black as a prickling sensation swept over her entire body, but subtly different at the same time. In the moment she had before that quick twist into timeless nothing, Ginny felt her eyes grow wide at the realization of just what the Order had planned as her means of escape.

Forced Apparation.

The act of forcibly removing a person from one location to another, rather than letting them attempt to do so themselves. It was difficult to achieve even under controlled and careful moderated conditions. Those that attempted it had little choice but to go along for the ride with whomever it was they were forcing through, as the backlash such an act created was extremely dangerous to any caught within its radius. Put in Muggle terms it was rather similar to setting off a space rocket and staying behind - right underneath the actual exhaust. Naturally every Ministry in the world considered it criminally dangerous and unequivocally illegal.

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Ginny watched, as the world faded back into being and blossomed back into life, as she found herself Apparating back into existence. Thirty or forty yards away she saw Pettigrew being caught unawares in the resulting detonation caused by her forced Disapparation. The blast was not fiery in its nature, but that did not lessen the damage it caused Pettigrew, who was literally caught standing at ground zero.

All told, it was a rather surprising series of events, particularly as Ginny had only had a split second to realize what was about to happen. Even now, as Pettigrew was sent hurtling into the air with a crack like thunder, she could scarcely believe the Order had done what they had. The fight must have been even more dire than she realized for them to attempt such a dangerous gambit. Of course, Ginny's surprise was nothing compared to the expression now on Voldemort's gaunt and pale face.

Blinking and swaying uncertainly on her feet, Ginny looked around. She was, she quickly gathered, about half way between Voldemort and where Dumbledore was currently fighting. This, unfortunately from her point of view, put her almost twice as far from Harry as she had originally been. She blinked again, aware of the rubbery feeling in all her muscles and the intermittent blurring of her vision, which was coming in waves.

Well, she thought as she looked around at the skirmish surrounding her, I think we can safely say that didn't go exactly as planned.

Yer out of the line of fire, aren't yeh? What're yeh complaining about? asked Loki, sounding a bit indignant as well as a trifle abashed by their failure to transfer her fully out of the battle zone. Ginny did not respond. Instead she watched with a strange feeling of detachment as Hogwarts' new defenses wrecked havoc across the battlefield.

From one of the battlements a length of chain, with links as thick as Ginny's wrist, reached out and wrapped itself around the waist of a nearby troll. As the dull-witted creature struggled to free itself, the chain lifted it bodily into the air and, with an almost casual flick, tossed it all the way to the edge of the burning forest - where it landed with a resounding thud and a considerable amount of splatter. Its task completed for the moment, the chain retracted back into its hole with a whiplike crack.

Then the battle-scarred lawn, the world itself, tilted at a horribly wrong angle.

Ginny reached out with her arms, trying to steady herself even as her knees began to buckle beneath her. With a grimace of renewed pain, she hoped that the ground --which was rushing up to meet her-- would not smack her too hard.

"Now?"

"Now."

"You were supposed to get her back inside the castle where she'd be safe!" Harry snapped with palpable aggravation. He was so angry with the Order at the moment, for failing to convey Ginny to safety, that he was actually speaking out loud to them.

Sorry, Harry, apologised Quetzalcoatl as he tried to explain, **but forced Apparation is hardly an*

*exact science.**

Sun Tzu quickly added an authoritative, **Of course it isn't - it's magic; which by definition is inherently unstable...**

"As much as I'm sure this will become a thrilling debate," interrupted Harry, "could you, please, keep your minds on the matter at hand?"

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He leapt nimbly over the still-flaming tree trunk that he had used earlier to clear away the bulk of the foes which had been facing him, but had now discarded. He found himself almost on top of a pair of zombies and a lone goblin mercenary. Responding to their presence almost as he was landing, Harry cast a powerful fireball and launched it at the nearest zombie. It struck the undead creature in the chest and instantly engulfed most of its body.

In a blur of motion a razor-edged chain --one of Hogwarts' active defences-- shot out from the wall of the nearby Astronomy Tower and, with deft precision, sliced through the remaining zombie's legs at the knees. The legless cadaver toppled over like a felled tree just as the chain snapped back and decapitated it, disappearing from view before the body hit the ground.

Harry turned to face down the goblin, ignoring the smouldering lower half remains of the first zombie between them. The goblin looked from Harry to the bodiless legs --which were walking aimlessly about-- and back to Harry. Clearly deciding that discretion was the better part of valour, the mercenary quickly discarded his glaive and buckler. Turned on a heel he began to flee as quickly as his stumpy legs could carry him.

"Oh, having second thoughts are you?" Harry called after him, casually reaching out with one foot to trip the wandering pair of zombie legs.

Considering how unintelligent he obviously was, probably only first thoughts.

If that.

Isis, unlike some of her companions, was still paying attention to what was happening around Harry.

Three vampires to your left.

Harry turned his head in that direction and, upon confirming Isis' warning, lifted his wand and snapped out, "*Lusus Naturae!*"

Immediately a thick tangle of pointed saplings erupted up from the ground at the approaching vampires' feet. The small but rapidly growing plants speared upwards and impaled each of the vampires a dozen times over. Only one, however, was struck through the heart and burst into flames - thus ensuring the demise of his two companions as they were quickly engulfed in the fire that spread through the trap ensnaring them.

Turning away from the impromptu funeral pyre, Harry looked to where he could see Ginny - lying motionless on the lawn. Knowing that she was at least still alive, thanks to the bond provided by their link to the Order, he asked after her condition, *Gin, are you all right?*

~As well as can be expected, though I don't know how long that'll last~ she replied after several agonizing moments of silence. Though her thoughts were strong and steady, Harry could still feel the underlying current of pain beneath them.

At least none of Voldemort's underlings are heading your way.

~I guess they're either too stunned to move or think I'm already dead.~

Probably the latter, he offered, *since they're definitely moving against me.*

It was Beowulf's calm voice that interrupted them as he concisely directed Harry's attention to what was happening not far from where he was standing. **There's a Death Eater preparing to cast a Bone Splintering Curse.**

Harry turned to where the Death Eater was chanting, preparing one of the more complex curses which required more than a simple incantation to cast. The man was just about ready to direct the lethal curse at Harry, something which Loki immediately began to comment upon. **He's almost finished too.*

*You'd better--**

"*Nausaem Irae!*" Harry barked.

Almost immediately the Death Eater seemed to fold himself in half and collapse. His movements were jerky and uncontrolled as he scrabbled with both hands to pull his mask away, as the potent sickness hex began to work its way through his system.

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--hurry, finished Loki, just as the fallen wizard began to convulsively expel the contents of his stomach - with such force that he would soon be vomiting up blood as well. Harry only had a moment to consider possibly stunning the Death Eater when Loki shouted out, **Behind you!**

Spinning on a heel Harry just managed to evade the outstretched arms of the zombie that had crept up on him. Planting his feet firmly he grasped one of the thing's wrists and, applying just the right amount of force, twisted to launch the zombie over his shoulder. The zombie, unprepared to perform triple somersaults, could do nothing as it was sent flying head over heels into a pair of onrushing vampires that Harry had detected at about the same time.

~Be careful~ Ginny cautioned him, clearly following the fight even though she was no longer an active participant.

Always, love, reassured Harry as he found himself abruptly turning and staring into the burning gaze of Voldemort.

"You may have the proverbial nine lives of a cat, Harry," Voldemort declared as they made eye contact, "but even an additional eight won't spare you from my wrath!"

Ooooh, he's getting angry, Osiris blithely remarked.

Practically livid, agreed Iphicles.

Harry refrained from groaning and turned his attention away from the Dark Lord and back to the latest set of opponents that were slowly making their way towards him. Again, he spoke to the Order out loud, "Would you forget Voldemort and help me with these zombies?"

A soft and dulcet voice spoke up, **There are a lot of them.**

How observant of you, Miko, Harry agreed. He spun a web of mystical energy between his hands and formed a weighted steel wire net which he cast at the nearest zombie's feet. *Now be a dear and make sure none of them manage to sneak up behind me.*

Come on, Harry, urged Romulus, **there must be something more we can do to help.**

Pausing in his activities for a second to consider, Harry nodded his head. *Well, there is one thing you could try.*

What?

"Start praying."

The fight was not going well. This much Dumbledore could easily discern. In spite of the heavy casualties incurred by both Harry and Ginny thus far, as well as the school's defences and the efforts of the other defenders, they were still badly outnumbered by Voldemort's minions.

The vampires in particular were giving Dumbledore and his six companions a great deal of trouble.

The problem lay in the fact that, as preternatural creatures, the vampires were a great deal stronger and faster than an ordinary witch or wizard. It was the speed, more than anything else, which was causing them difficulties as it made it particularly hard to score a hit with a curse when the target was moving so rapidly.

Voldemort's legion of zombies, as well as the surviving trolls and goblin mercenaries, were not as difficult to deal with. Still, what they lacked in ability they made up for in numbers and --in the case of the trolls-- enthusiasm. The zombies were little more than nuisances, as they tended to get in the way a lot, but could prove dangerous should they manage to get in close enough to their intended victim to use their hands and teeth.

Fortunately most of the Death Eaters seemed intent on Harry.

With the anti-Portkey wards that Draco Malfoy had created now removed, as Minerva and Ronald Weasley had reported shortly after Harry's awakening, he and the Aurors could now easily pull out of the fight by means of being retrieved via the bracelets they all wore at their wrists.

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Dumbledore, however, was dubious about Harry and Ginny's chances of survival should it come to that. While it was obvious that Harry was fully capable of removing himself from the battle, Ginny was just as obviously powerless to do the same. This, of course, meant that Harry --who would never abandon her-- would not be leaving the fight until it was properly over.

The problem could be solved rather easily if only one of them could reach young Virginia. Each of seven rescuers carried two spare Portkey bracelets in their robes, taken off the Aurors that had remained in the school, one for Harry and the other for Ginny. It would not take long to slip the bracelet onto the young witch and have her retrieved to the safety of the underground Situation Room. Unfortunately, the vampires were proving... difficult to get past.

"What d'we do now?" asked Josella Playton, in between incinerating a zombie and stunning one of the few remaining goblins.

"I think we should switch to Plan B," Dumbledore declared sagely as he directed a concentrated beam of sunlight from his wand at a pair of onrushing vampires.

Will Masen, who was pressing his arm against bruised ribs, asked, "And what might that be?"

Dumbledore frowned as only one vampire was caught in the beam of sunlight and ignited into flames. The other ducked beneath the deadly light and rolled clear. Spotting another of the undead trying to speed in from his left, Dumbledore turned his wand in that direction and conjured up a small barrage of wooden stakes. As the vampire jerked its arms up before combusting into dust, he answered the Auror's question.

"I'm not altogether sure as I have not yet thought it up."

"Great," muttered Tal Whitman.

Bryce Hammond, who was standing back to back with Jenny Paige, stated blandly, "Think it up fast, headmaster, or we're dead."

Dumbledore was about to respond when something completely unexpected happened. A zombie, which had been shuffling towards the tightly clustered group, was abruptly knocked off its feet - a gleaming silver trident deeply embedded in its back. Looking past the fallen creature, which was trying to claw its way forward in spite of its impediment, Dumbledore sighted the source of the spear - though in truth he had already guessed it.

There in the shallows of the lake shore, only their upper bodies lifted out of the water, were row upon row of merpeople. They were lined up by the dozen in orderly ranks, male and female alike, and all armed with their customary spears and tridents. Dumbledore recognised the mer-chieftainess, whose name could not be properly pronounced by anyone who still had a tongue, raising one arm high in the air before dropping it down as a signal to launch the first volley of spears.

"Nobody dies until I give them permission!"

The clear and resonant voice called out from the direction of the burning Forbidden Forest, diverting Dumbledore and the others' attention away from the merpeople's entry into the fight. They appeared through the thick smoke from the burning trees, striding side by side, were the Professors Proteus.

"You are late," called Dumbledore, pretending not to be relieved by the sight of them and their secretly assembled allies.

And what allies they were! Not since before the time of Merlin had centaurs joined themselves in battle with men. Yet, trotting out of the devastated forest, were nearly two dozen of the magical creatures, a few of which were familiar to the headmaster. Unadorned with any clothing or protection and armed with ancient blades of elvish design, the centaurs shifted about for a short time --clearly assessing what lay before them-- before galloping into the fray with uncanny speed and precision.

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Using her wand to ensnare one dumbstruck Death Eater who had been standing near the forest edge with a web of shimmering rope, Hilary Proteus explained their delay. "Have you ever tried to commute through the Forbidden Forest --or what's left of it-- with a small army behind you, while trying not to let on that you're coming?"

Dumbledore, and his six companions, did not let the arrive of the Proteuses and the centaurs distract them too much from the fight. Even though the numbers of foes pressing against them had slackened somewhat, as the vampires and other minions were suddenly forced to deal with the new arrivals as well, Dumbledore knew that he and his companions were not out of the woods yet.

Still, when he could, the old wizard managed to catch glimpses of the pair as they made their way from the forest edge to where he and the six Aurors were fighting. They moved with such grace and economy of movement that it was almost a beautiful thing to watch. As Dumbledore was doing, they concentrated mostly on those vampires which rushed out to meet them - matching the undead speed and agility with what seemed like almost casual ease. The many zombies, scattered trolls and few remaining goblins were dealt with as they came across them.

"The pair of them are nuts," summed up Halleck, who was also watching the pair out the corner of his eye. He was bleeding from a cut to his cheek, but paid the wound no heed as he cast a Petrifying Charm on an approaching troll. "Either that or I took a blow to the head earlier and didn't notice."

"I'd say a little bit of both, Gurney," quipped Hilary as she and Gregory surged to within a dozen yards of Dumbledore and the Aurors.

At that moment, when most of their attention was involuntarily focused on the two professors, a pair of vampires struck. The first barged forward with little or no subtlety in his approach and quickly fell to a speedily conjured stake from Will Masen. His companion, however, had been crafty in his approach. He placed his hands on the first's shoulders from his position behind him and levered himself up an instant before his comrade burst into flames.

Vaulting high in the air and over the heads of the defenders, he landed in their very midst with a hiss of glee. He leapt across at the two Aurors directly in front of him, Bryce and Jenny, brushing sharply against Dumbledore as he did. As he staggered from the knock he had received, Dumbledore saw the vampire knock Bryce away from Jenny with a swift backhand that sent the young wizard tumbling to the ground with a crack of broken bone.

Jenny, her eyes following Bryce's fall, stood helpless before the vampire. Dumbledore could see that none of the other Aurors would be able to bring their wands around in time to do anything to save the red-haired witch. He felt his body tense with terrible expectation as he waited for the vampire to kill her, unable to do anything but watch.

The blow was faster than the human eye could easily follow and so utterly unexpected that it was not until the sharp crack of knuckle meeting jaw and the soft pop of that same jaw being dislocated, that Dumbledore realized that fate had suddenly chosen to intervene.

"Good dogs don't bite!" said Gregory as he slammed a wooden stake into the dazed vampire's heart.

The vampire looked down, seemingly surprised to see the stake buried in his chest, and managed to look up at Gregory with a shocked expression before bursting into flame.

"He didn't know what hit him," noted Hilary, just behind her husband.

"I hit him," replied Gregory, lending Bryce a hand as the Auror struggled back onto his feet. Once he was standing upright and steady, the professor released him and turned to Dumbledore to ask, "You all right?"

"Reasonably so, my boy," Dumbledore assured him. He then turned in one particular direction and admitted, "However, our own attempts to reach young Virginia have yet to bear fruit."

Gregory came to stand at the headmaster's shoulder, Hilary stand on his other side. He grinned in that familiarly lopsided and slightly mischievous manner. "It's just a matter of time, sir."

Dumbledore remarked ruefully, "Time does not appear to be on our side at the moment."

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"Not to worry, Albus, time owes us --and them-- a favour or two," Hilary declared, her hazel eyes shining brightly with the eagerness of being joined in battle. She raised her wand and directed it at a knot of a dozen or so vampires that were slowly approaching. "*Excelsior Solarum!*"

A brilliant light washed out of her wand, momentarily putting Dumbledore in mind of the massive search lights he remembered the Muggles using to spot attack airplanes during the Second World War. It was very similar, mostly in its intensity, range and breadth - which proved more than enough to engulf and quickly disintegrate the vampires caught in its brilliant glare.

Dumbledore was about to congratulate Hilary on the remarkable feat, which very few witches could have pulled off, when he saw something that caused his heart to skip a beat. A pair of Death Eaters, unmistakable in their black robes and masks, had come within only a couple of paces where Ginny lay unmoving in the mud, some fifty or so yards away.

"No!" he cried, clutching helplessly at the air before him. "We're too late!"

"Actually, I think we're right on time," observed Gregory with remarkable calm.

To put it delicately, Voldemort was furious. He had not been this angry in decades, not even when

Harry Potter had teleported the Dark Lord and several of his Death Eaters into the frigid wastelands of Siberia the previous year.

He had been growing increasingly frustrated as the afternoon wore on, mostly because of the stubborn resistance of Potter's girlfriend and then Potter himself. The arrival of Dumbledore and half a dozen Aurors on the battlefield had elevated that frustration into anger. His carefully crafted plans, months -- years-- of preparation, were being disrupted by a rag tag bunch of second-rate wizards.

It was only when those thrice-accursed Defence Against the Dark Arts professors had appeared out of the Forbidden Forest, accompanied by more Centaurs than any wizard had seen together in one place since the days of Merlin, that his anger had begun to boil into a black fury that threaten to consume him. His assault was no longer being disrupted...

...it was being flushed down the toilet!

"What are your orders, Lord Voldemort?" asked a sibilant voice to his side. Voldemort turned his head a fraction, until his peripheral vision could see the vampire brood leader that had come to stand just behind him. The pale-faced creature motioned at the battle taking place before them. "The battle does not proceed in the manner you led us to believe it would."

"I have not yet begun to fight," Voldemort ground out through clenched teeth.

"Perhaps now would be a good time for you to start."

Voldemort whirled on the vampire, his thin lips parted in an incensed snarl as he drew his wand and levelled it at the undead creature's chest. "*Solaris Lux!*"

The vampire howled in agony as it burst into flames, the power of Voldemort's spell amplified beyond what it would normally be thanks to his unchecked anger. Disintegrating into a shower of rapidly fading cinders, it was only a matter of heartbeats before all trace of the vampire was completely gone.

"Bah!" exclaimed Voldemort as he turned away from the few remaining sparks and the ash which drifted on the light wind. He focused his crimson gaze back on the chaos-strewn lawn and muttered unhappily to himself, "I am surrounded by incompetent buffoons! The girl was right - good help *is* hard to find!"

Although clearly Potter and his friends knew where to find such good help.

No, he realized after standing to watch for a time. Potter was not the one in charge here. Nor was it that old fool, Dumbledore, or any of his lackey Aurors. It was those Defence professors, whom his spies had identified as Gregory and Hilary Proteus. They were the ones directing the flow of battle, at least with regards the galloping centaurs. It was incredible in a way - almost as if they knew what was going to happen before it did.

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After a lifetime, and more than that, of assessing his enemies and others, Voldemort was adept at recognising a cunning foe. Someone who was crafty, devious and unafraid to break the rules where it suited them - much like any self respecting Slytherin. He had even learnt how to appreciate such cunning in those rare enemies that displayed it. And he was rapidly concluding that the witch and wizard leading this renewed assault against him were either incredibly cunning... or quite perfectly out of their minds.

Just then two of his Death Eaters caught his eye. He recognised the one as Nott, the other might have been young Timothy Flyte, though Voldemort was not sure. The pair had abandoned the seemingly hopeless attack on Potter and had moved to reclaim the girl, Weasley, no doubt hoping that regaining custody of her would provide a lever against the Boy Who Lived. It was a sound idea and, providing it worked, Voldemort decided to reward them for thinking it.

His lips were just curling into a ghost of a smile as Nott and Flyte grabbed the girl and tried to pull her up. The smile died before it was even half-formed when the girl, now lifted onto her hands and knees, promptly ceased to be a girl. The two Death Eaters were so obviously unprepared to the transformation that she was able to dispatch them both in a matter of seconds with sharp kicks from both her front and back legs.

"She's an Animagus?" he said in disbelief.

"Indeed," confirmed a vampire standing at his side, one which had apparently decided to brave Voldemort's presence and temper. The vampire's eyes were alight with amusement, even though his voice was without inflection. "Hogwarts seems to have turned out a great number Animagi over the years."

Voldemort could not identify the exact breed, he was not an equestrian of any sort, but he could tell at a glance that Virginia Weasley's Animagus form was a truly magnificent example of the species. The mare she had become was equal in size to a large unicorn, perhaps the tiniest fraction smaller, and her shiny chestnut coat was lit up by the fire consuming the Forbidden Forest so as to be almost the colour of fresh blood.

Neighing loudly, and startling several trolls, the mare rose up onto her hind legs and kicked in the head of one zombie that was lurching unsteadily towards her. As the zombie fell to the ground, its head crushed like a ripe melon, the mare snorted indelicately and started off in a lightning-fast gallop to where Potter was currently dealing with several vampires.

"They are decimating our forces," commented the vampire. He nodded to where a quartet of centaurs were wheeling around by the foot of the Astronomy Tower. "The centaurs are also causing mounting casualties. We should withdraw our troops while we still have troops to withdraw."

"You dare to suggest such a thing to me? That we retreat?" Voldemort asked in a dangerous voice, his burgeoning fury growing as he watched the chestnut coloured mare --with short white socks on all four legs he now saw-- butt a zombie away from Potter.

The vampire did not seem perturbed by the Dark Lord's tone and stated matter-of-factly, "This is not a

battle we can win. Not without an exorbitantly high price."

Voldemort watched as Potter, a broad grin on his face, placed a hand on the mare's shoulder and leapt up onto her back with practiced ease. He held a wickedly curved goblin scimitar in one hand, appropriated from one of the mercenaries, and his wand in the other. The pair moved with such smooth grace that Voldemort could have sworn they were one being, practically a centaur in the unity of their motions.

"Victory is worth any price. Even the unlives of all your brood."

"I take my orders from the Council of Ancients," the vampire countered. "Not you."

He sneered. "Your precious council has--"

The brood leader quickly interrupted him, "Not given you such latitude as to order us to commit suicide."

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Voldemort grit his teeth so tightly that they ground audibly together as he turned away from the vampire to survey the battle once again. He came about just in time to see a trio of gargoyles, on the castle walls, spread their stone wings wide and lifted themselves up into the air. Hovering high above the school grounds, two of the animated guardians began to rain their blue-flamed fireballs down upon the attackers. The third, however, swooped down like a great bird of prey and fell upon a pair of panicking vampires - rending them limb from limb with its stone claws.

Not far from where this was happening, near the North Tower, a group of centaurs were engaged in a scuffle with several cave trolls. The centaurs were stamping around the trolls, herding them this way and that while occasionally sneaking in to land a cutting blow with their ancient elvish blades. The other centaurs, it seemed, were scattered about in twos and threes, striking at whatever dark creature crossed their path as they cantered to and fro.

"Very well then," he declared unhappily, after having just seen Potter decapitate a vampire while charging past on the Weasley girl's back. He seemed so comfortable riding the mare that the pair were almost a match for the graceful centaurs. Clenching his hands into tight fists, his nails digging deep into his palms and actually drawing blood, Voldemort spat out the order to retreat, "Signal for your people to draw back into the safety of the Forbidden Forest. The trolls, zombies and remaining goblins will serve to cover your escape. They are expendable. My Death Eaters and I shall rendezvous with you at the agree upon location at midnight tonight."

"By your command, Lord Voldemort," accepted the brood leader, bowing at the waist.

Straightening up, the vampire turned to leave, but paused for some reason. Voldemort was about to turn and see what caused his to pause, but the vampire spoke up before that was necessary.

"What of your servant?" he asked with a nod of his head at Pettigrew's torn and bleeding body. "He is not too grievously hurt. He might yet live."

"Perhaps," Voldemort agreed viciously, "but for his failure I intend to see that he will not enjoy it!"

"They're falling back."

Ginny could feel the relief seeping into Harry's voice as he stated what was quickly becoming very obvious. As he said, Voldemort and most of his followers were withdrawing into the burning cover of the Forbidden Forest - leaving the trolls, zombies and goblins to cover their retreat. This close to the castle they could not simply Apparate away, the wards set down by the Founders still in place despite everything that had happened during the day's long course.

Hah! We have emerged victorious! crowed Loki, projecting the mental equivalent of pumping his fists in the air and doing a little jig.

Not decisively, Loki. This was but one battle in the war, Sun Tzu's cultured voice chided lightly, but he still sounded pleased that the reprieve they had been waiting for had finally come about.

Slowing to an easy canter, Ginny watched as the remaining vampires seemed to blending into the flickering shadows and disappear, while the Death Eaters literally turned and ran into the depths of the forest. The goblin mercenaries tried to follow, as did some of the smarter trolls, but both groups had been reduced to a bare handful of survivors each and quickly found their escape being cut off by the centaurs.

Thinking about the centaurs, and her current similarity to the magical beings, reminded Ginny of the exhaustion which seemed to permeate her entire body. She was suddenly aware of the unsteady trembling of her muscles and the effort of will it was taking to remain standing. Harry's weight, not too much for her to bear under better circumstances, was also beginning to become a tiresome burden.

Harry? she asked. *Could you get off me, please? Before I collapse...*

"Of course."

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He had no sooner said he would than he had, swinging his leg over Ginny's back and dropping to the ground by her side. Had she still been human she would have sighed with relief, but settled instead for a low neigh and snuffle. Harry was tenderly rubbing his hands over her quivering flanks when, before Ginny could begin the transformation back to her human form, the tall and majestic form of a centaur trotted up to them.

"Harry Potter," he greeted in a solemn voice, nodding politely.

"Uh, hello Ronan," he replied, sounding rather surprised to see the red-haired and chestnut coated centaur.

Ronan nodded again and almost smiled. "It is most gratifying to see that you have learnt a little more than 'a bit' since last we met."

Harry seemed to fish for words for a moment before answering. "I suppose so."

You've met him before? Ginny asked him.

~In my first year... serving detention with Hagrid in the forest...~ he replied, not letting his eyes stray away from Ronan, or the long and curved sword the centaur was holding casually in one hand - its blade coated with blood and grime. He swallowed and said, "Thank you for your help."

"No thanks is needed, custodian of the phoenix," Ronan told Harry. He tilted his head back and looked up at the sky, "Mars is bright and the evening star moves swiftly."

"Erm..."

Ginny was as perplexed as Harry looked and asked, *What the devil does that mean?*

~Damned if I know~ he answered, sounding a little bemused. *~You have a better chance of finding corners on a circle than you do of getting a straight answer out of this lot~*

"Your... professors... sought out our assistance in this matter," continued Ronan. He pointed with the tip of his sword to where Dumbledore, the Proteuses and the Aurors were busy hexing a cluster of abandoned zombies. "We were obligated to aid them."

"Professors?" Harry asked, puzzled.

"You know them as Gregory and Hilary Proteus, I believe."

Harry stared at the centaur with wide eyes. "They went to you for help?"

"You should rest now; the battle is over. We shall to pursue the Dark Lord's forces through the forest as best we can," Ronan spoke, using his free hand to wave to his fellow centaurs, motioning them to start their pursuit. The centaurs swiftly began to abandon the upturned and scorched lawns of Hogwarts, vanishing amidst the burning trees and into the forest. As they departed, Ronan turned to join them. "Farewell, Harry Potter. We shall not meet again until you, and your mate, become teachers at Hogwarts."

"When? But - but..."

Sighing as she returned to her true form, Ginny shook her head and waved for Harry to be quiet as Ronan galloped off. "Oh, let it be for now, Harry. I couldn't care any less about centaur mysticism at the moment."

Shutting his mouth and swallowing any further protestations, Harry turned to look at Ginny as she swayed unsteadily on her feet. His eyes raked over her figure, a quick down and up movement that assessed her condition - which was something of a mess, she knew.

"You look like a drowned rat," he said affectionately as he made his way to stand at her side. Ginny stuck her tongue out at him, prompting a smile as he continued, "I'm amazed you're still on your feet."

"Ordinarily this would be the perfect time to come up with some witty remark about buttered toast," she said with a depreciating humour, reminding Harry of what he had said after the fight he had entered into on Christmas, "but right now I'm too tired to have hallucinations."

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Harry looked at her, concern filling his eyes, and reached out to take hold of her elbow with a steadying hand and asked, "Does it hurt much?"

Ginny shook her head and lied, convinced that he was not able to see through her rather pitiful attempt at deception, "Not especially. Just a sort of dull ache really."

"Come on, let's get you to Madam Pomfrey," Harry suggested.

"Actually, I think you're going to have to carry me," Ginny said.

Harry was close enough to catch her before she collapsed to the ground in a dead faint.

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24. Battle's Wake

Harry struggled with Ginny's limp form for several precarious moments in which it almost seemed as though he was going to drop her. Regardless of how it might seem on the telly or the movies, supporting a dead weight --not that Harry was suicidal enough to suggest that Ginny weighed more than a feather-- was no easy task, even with magically enhanced strength and reflexes.

Eventually, managing to hook one arm underneath her dangling legs, Harry was able to hoist Ginny up into his arms. He was just securing his footing when Ron, Hermione following close on his heels, came charging out of Hogwarts moments after the protective shields were retracted. The frantic looking red-haired wizard immediately sprinted in Harry's direction, a concerned look written plainly on his pale face.

"Is she okay? Is she all right?" he gasped as he drew near.

"She's okay," Harry assured him. "She's all right."

"Thank God," Ron breathed, relaxing as Hermione joined him.

Harry shifted Ginny into a more secure grip and added, "I need to get her to the Hospital Wing, though."

Ron, naturally, became fretful again. He looked at Harry anxiously and asked, his voice pitched somewhat higher than normal, "*What?* Why? What's wrong with her? You said she was okay!"

"Don't be an idiot, Ron," scolded Hermione, looking askance at her boyfriend. She shook her head, causing her bushy hair to whip about, and pointed where Ginny was held in Harry's arms, "Ginny may be okay, but you can't honestly expect her to be perfectly peachy! You-Know-Who was torturing her with the Cruciatus Curse for pity's sake!"

"How am I going to explain this to Mum and Dad?" Ron moaned, running his hand over his face as he stared worriedly at his sister.

Your friend seems over-stressed. He needs a holiday, observed Iphicles.

He's not the only one, replied Harry, tiredly.

He was just preparing to Apparate both Ginny and himself directly to the infirmary, where he hoped Madam Pomfrey was already preparing to treat the wounded, when Dumbledore came striding across

the lawn. The headmaster looked a little bit the worse for wear, his deep purple robes muddled and scuffed in places, but otherwise considerably pleased with the outcome of things.

"Ah, Harry."

"Not now, Albus," Harry cut him off. He motioned as best he could with his hands for everyone to move away. "Step back."

"Harry?" asked Hermione.

"I'm going to Apparate us to the infirmary," he explained, tightening his hold on Ginny. "You can follow on foot."

Ron immediately stepped right up to him and grasped hold of one of Harry's arms, shaking his head and protesting loudly, "No way, mate! That's my sister you're carrying - we're coming with you."

Hermione reached out to try and placate the flustered young wizard. "Ron, I don't think--"

Unfortunately, Harry had been on the verge of Apparating as this entire sequence of events played out. This meant that when he and Ginny Disapparated from the grounds and Apparated into the empty Hospital Wing, Ron and Hermione were unwittingly brought along with them.

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Harry struggled to remain on his feet as a wave of dizziness and nausea immediately assailed him as the four teenagers appeared with an echoing crack. Luckily his senses were exceptionally attuned to the sensation of Apparation and he was quickly able to shake off the effects of having transported not just himself but three others as well. Hermione and Ron, he noticed as his head cleared, were not as fortunate.

"Oh... that was a bad idea," groaned Hermione, swaying unsteadily where she was standing, both hands pressed against her temples as if trying to ward off a headache.

"No kidding," Ron immediately agreed, his voice thick and broken. He staggered on tremulous legs to the nearest bed and sat down on it, swallowing repeatedly in an attempt to quell the protests of his doubtless churning stomach. "I haven't felt this woozy since right before my first Quidditch match, last year."

Having regained full use of his faculties, Harry quickly moved to where Ron was sitting and impatiently prodded him out of the way so that he could settle Ginny down on the bed in her brother's place. As he released her from his arms he glanced over his shoulder to where Ron had rejoined Hermione, both leaning against each other for support.

"It's just a side-effect of the Apparation," he told them a bit brusquely. At the moment he was more concerned with treating Ginny than he was with the consequences of their hitchhiking. "The ether around the castle is still a little disturbed after the trap dispersed the Well of Shadows."

Ron groaned and shook his head. This was clearly a bad thing to do as he instantly winced and groaned even louder, "I hope so, 'cause if this was how Apparation normally feels, I wouldn't ever want to learn."

Hermione muttered very quietly, as if afraid that talking too loudly would cause her brain to begin leaking out of her ears, "I expect that Apparating all four of us didn't help much."

"Probably not," agreed Harry, turning his attention back to Ginny.

"Then why didn't you do us one at a time?" asked Ron.

"I was in a hurry and I'm not about to leave her alone."

"No, I mean why didn't you just Apparate Hermione and me to here and then come afterwards?"

Hermione began to explain, as she usually did, before Harry had a chance to form his own reply. This was fine by Harry, as he was busy casting a variety of low-key Healing and Palliative Charms on the unconscious Ginny in the hopes of easing her apparent discomfort. It was a good thing that being bonded to the Order of the Phoenix made such expertise second nature to him, literally instinctual when came to the simpler spells.

"To do that he would've had to use Forced Apparation," Hermione said, as though that fact should have been perfectly obvious.

Ron looked at her in confusion. "But isn't that what he just did? Apparate with extra people?"

"That wasn't *Forced* Apparation, Ron, that was *Extended* Apparation," she emphasised the words after briefly rolling her eyes.

"Eh?"

"What Harry did just now was Apparate the four of us to the Hospital Wing by extending his translocation aura to encapsulate our own through tactile contact."

****She certainly knows her stuff, doesn't she?****

****Forget about that and concentrate with the rest of us. Virginia's not out of danger yet.****

This time it was Ron's turn to roll his eyes. "In English."

Hermione scowled at him and crossed her arms. "He was touching us, which is why we Apparated with him."

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Ron looked at her askance. "So why didn't you just say that?"

Hermione stomped a foot and glared at him, "I did!"

"All right, then what's the difference between that and 'Forced Apparation'?" asked Ron in a sudden switch. Whether the abrupt turnaround was because of the changes caused by his time in a coma or that he had realized that his girlfriend was almost at the point of visiting bodily harm upon him was unclear. "Is that when you're not touching the person you're Apparating?"

"Exactly!" Hermione nodded, still a bit worked up.

"And that explosion thing that knocked Pettigrew away from Ginny?" Ron waved his hands vaguely in the air in an attempt to mimic the force which had blown Wormtail a dozen metres into the air. "That

was because of... Forced Apparation?"

"Action and reaction," confirmed Harry, who had pulled up a seat and was sitting by Ginny's side as he tried to patiently wait for Madam Pomfrey.

Ron turned to him in confusion. "What?"

Harry was too tired to give a proper explanation, and also knew that Hermione would likely be able to give one herself, so settled for shrugging while he carefully scraped away the mud and other grime coating Ginny's face. "Forced Apparation is very difficult."

"He's not kidding," agreed Hermione. "Only one wizard in fifty can safely perform Extended Apparation and compared to Forced, that's easy."

"So it was you that got Ginny away from Wormtail?" asked Ron.

"The Order," Harry corrected.

****We would have preferred to try something less hazardous, but we were rather short of options and sorely pressed for time,**** admitted Merlin quietly as Harry finished casting a Scourging Charm to remove the muck coating Ginny like a second skin.

I know. Don't let it bother you, assuaged Harry. The results were good enough under the circumstances.

The creak of the infirmary doors swinging open alerted the three students to the arrival of Madam Pomfrey, who came bustling into the Hospital Wing at a brisk clip.

"Mr Potter!" the Hogwarts matron exclaimed as she spotted him, now standing at the foot of Ginny's bed and waiting for her. The Healer shook her head as she approached. "I'm not surprised to find you here, though I am surprised that you're not unconscious."

"It's Ginny," explained Harry, motioning at the bed with a jerk of his head.

Pomfrey took one look at Ginny and nodded briskly, shuffling past Ron and Hermione to stand at the bedside, while rolling up the sleeves of her robe. "Ah, yes. I should have expected that."

Harry moved to her side and said quietly, "I've done what I could to stabilize her and make her comfortable."

"And how much do you know about stabilizing someone that's been tortured with Cruciatus?" asked Pomfrey in an imperious, and slightly affronted tone.

"Both too much and too little," he replied curtly.

Pomfrey looked at him for a second before nodding in acquiescence, clearly remembering that Harry had experienced his own fair share --more than his fair share, truth be told-- of time under the influence of the Cruciatus Curse.

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"I understand from Severus that you know your potions?" she asked, more a statement than a question, though Harry took it as one and nodded his confirmation. Pomfrey pointed him in the direction of her office. "Then go into my office. You'll find a small flagon of Nerve Induction Stimulant; it's next to the Glans Swelling Reducer. Better bring that as well, now that I think about it. They're on the right side of the second shelf behind my desk."

Harry was halfway to the room before she finished speaking.

"How long d'you think it'll be before she wakes up?" Ron asked after several minutes had passed. He and Hermione had been dispatched by Madam Pomfrey to stand well clear from the bed where she and Harry were bustling around the unconscious Ginny.

Hermione shrugged and guessed, "Several hours at least, perhaps even a day or two."

"Sometime tomorrow morning," Harry informed the pair, coming to stand by them. "Madam Pomfrey mixed some Calming Solution in with one of the Muscle Relaxants. It'll keep her under while the potions and the Order do their work."

"So she'll be all right?" asked Ron anxiously, looking over Harry's shoulder at the bed.

"She came dangerously close to having her brain cooked inside her skull, foolish girl," scolded Madam Pomfrey from where she was standing by the bedside. She shook her head in admonishment, as if amazed anyone would put their body through such an ordeal - even involuntarily. "Still, provided she makes an attempt to remain out of harm's way and gets enough rest for the next few days, she'll be as fit as --I hesitate to say it-- a horse again in a matter of days."

"I dare say I shall have to speak with the Ministry and see that Virginia is appropriately registered as an Animagus before Cornelius learns of her talent and has an aneurism."

The three students turned to find Professor Dumbledore coming through the doors leading out of the Hospital Wing. He had somehow managed, since Harry had last seen him outside on the grounds, to contrive to appear perfectly spotless - rather than as dishevelled and mud-covered as almost everyone else was.

It was not his sudden cleanliness which captured Harry's attention, however. It was the limp form of Draco Malfoy, laid out on a floating stretcher which drifted behind Dumbledore as it followed the headmaster into the infirmary. Without any conscious thought on his part, Harry had his wand drawn and aimed at the inert young wizard in a heartbeat, the Order's magical energy gathering around his wand so rapidly and forcibly that the very air crackled and shimmered.

"Try to remain calm, Harry," Dumbledore said, coming right up to him and placing a restraining hand on Harry's, forcing his wand down and away from Draco. "Mr Malfoy is unlikely to pose a threat in his current state."

"All right," Harry reluctantly agreed. He looked down at the once again pale-haired wizard that he had always seemed to be at odds with. Now that he had a good look at him, Harry had to admit that Draco did not appear to be much of a threat anymore. His pale, almost deathly white, features were slack and

he was bound to the stretcher by thick fastenings and an array of Restraining Charms that held Dumbledore's magical signature within him. Tucking his wand back into his robes he still warned, "But if he so much as twitches - I'll hex him so hard that if he ever wakes up, his robes will be out of style."

Dumbledore nodded in understanding, manoeuvring the stretcher so that he could deposit Draco on one of the beds towards the back of the infirmary - as far away from Ginny as he could manage. "I will be keeping an eye on him, until Duncan has a chance to spare some of his Aurors to stand guard, so do not worry needlessly over it."

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The clamber of boots on stone drew their attention back to the doors, where two of the Aurors assigned to the school were entering. The younger of the two, Tom Stratton, was leaning heavily on the shoulder of Thufir Hawat - a grizzled old wizard and third in charge of the division. The cause of Stratton's discomfort was plainly visible, but this did not stop Madam Pomfrey from asking.

"What happened to him?"

"Arrow to the shoulder," replied Hawat, helping Stratton to the nearest bed, which happened to be the one next to Ginny. He shook his head in disgust and explained unhappily, "Those bloody centaurs may have helped turn the tide, but their archery is deplorably indiscriminate."

"My people's skills with bow and arrow are unparalleled, Auror."

Once again everyone's attention was drawn to the infirmary entrance. Harry had the distracted thought that it was almost like a Muggle tennis match; the grand final at Wimbledon.

Only I bet Wimbledon's never had a centaur on the centre court, he mused, instantly recognizing Firenze, the centaur who had saved Harry's life during the detention he had served in the Forbidden Forest in his first year.

His hooves clip-clopped on the stone floor as Firenze slowly approached, his silvery blonde hair shining under the torchlight. He drew to a halt a pace or two short of where Madam Pomfrey was tending Stratton, his blue eyes focused on the seeping wound, and spoke. "Their fault lies in that they have no great love for men and are thus unconcerned in the event any of you might be caught between them and their intended prey."

"You, on the other hand, consider us brethren no doubt," scoffed Thufir.

"Mars, the bringer of war, burns strongly in the night sky. The indications are that wizardkind has been living through nothing more than a brief calm between two wars," replied Firenze, turning away from the Aurors so that he could face Dumbledore. "Now the second war, the greater though shorter-lived of the two, is upon us. A great evil stands on the cusp of domination, prompting me to ally myself with your kind."

Dumbledore nodded in agreement and, upon seeing Harry's frown, explained to the three students, "I was able to persuade the elders of Firenze's herd to leave him be when they attempted to trample him after he had indicated a desire to remain at Hogwarts."

Thufir was immediately suspicious and asked, "And why'd they want to do that, eh?"

"Because I offered to assist Professor Dumbledore in whatever way he might have need of my abilities," answered Firenze, his palomino tail swishing in agitation. "They see this as a betrayal of our kind."

"You mean they attacked you?" asked Hermione, looking at the centaur with wide eyes.

"Indeed, child," confirmed Firenze, swivelling to look at her. He sighed fractionally and shrugged his shoulders in what seemed like resignation. "They have banished me from the herd. I cannot return to the Forest."

"Not that there's much left of it," Ron muttered under his breath.

Firenze turned to Harry and extended a hand in greeting, "Harry Potter."

"Firenze," responded Harry, taking the centaur's hand and shaking firmly. "It's good to see you again."

"And you. It was foretold that we would meet again."

Harry raised his eyebrows and asked, "I was unaware that centaurs could read the heavens in such detail for you to know that."

It seemed for a moment that Firenze was about to smile. Even though he managed to restrain his features, his voice held a tinge of amusement as he replied, "The stars and planets are not our only means of divining what was, what is and what has yet to come, child of the phoenix."

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"Why did you help us against Voldemort, your herd I mean, if centaurs prefer to remain out of human affairs?"

"The one you call Gregory Proteus came into the Forest some time ago and spoke at length with the herd elders. I do not know what it is he discussed with them, only that he was able to convince them to side with you in this one battle," explained Firenze, his brow puckered in consideration. He shook his head. "Once they have chased the dark ones and creatures away the herd is planning to abandon the Forest - to seek safe haven in woods less travelled by men and their ilk."

Hermione looked concerned, much as she usually did when talking about house-elves, and asked worriedly, "But what will you do then? If you stay here at Hogwarts, I mean."

"That I do not know," replied Firenze calmly, "save for the knowledge that my services will soon be needed."

"In the meantime I think Firenze, and his remarkable knowledge of the Forest and its environs, will prove a valuable assistant to both Hagrid and Professor Sprout during the course of their lessons for the remainder of the year," supplied Dumbledore, who was now standing at Harry's side. He reached up and rested a hand on Harry's shoulder. "Now, Harry, if you'd care to join me in my office--"

"Can it wait, Albus?" Harry cut him off. He winced at the shortness of his interruption and tried to explain his reluctance to leave by motioning at the bed. "I'd rather not leave Ginny until she wakes up."

"Perfectly understandable," allowed Dumbledore. He released his hold on Harry's shoulder and stroked his thumb along his moustache. "I should be attempting to contact Molly and Arthur, though Arthur, in all likelihood, already knows about the attack. They too will doubtless wish to be at Virginia's side right now."

Harry breathed a quiet sigh of relief and nodded. "As soon as she's awake I'll come and see you."

Dumbledore waved a hand. "No need to hurry, dear boy. What I wish to tell you has waited many years. A few extra days shall not make much of a difference. You can wait until Virginia is mobile and able to join you."

"Ron and Hermione?" asked Harry with a nod to his friends.

"Feel free to bring them as well," Dumbledore replied with a wry smile, "since you shall, as a matter of course, share all that you learn with them."

Saying that Lord Voldemort was in a foul mood at the moment was somewhat akin to describing the battle at Hogwarts that afternoon as nothing more than a minor scuffle. Truth be told, the Dark Lord's current mood could only be described as highly incensed.

What was truly frightening, however, was the almost implacable calm which seemed to descend over him during such moments. It would have been much less unnerving had Voldemort been shouting and raging about in a fit of uncontrolled anger. Instead, the greater his displeasure, the greater his fury, the more composed and controlled his demeanour seemed to become.

Right now, he was glacially calm.

"Losing to a mere girl... and a Gryffindor at that. I find it unacceptable," Voldemort hissed in a deceptively mild tone of voice. Glistening red reptilian eyes slid over the kneeling Death Eaters until they came to rest on one particular wizard. "Isn't it, Macnair?"

Macnair nodded in shame. "Yes, my lord."

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It was brutally fast, though it must have seemed an eternity to Macnair. One instant he was kneeling before Voldemort, the next he was a pyre of flickering flames. Voldemort was not known for swift punishments, normally preferring to draw them out, sometimes for hours on end. It was a measure of his anger that he removed Macnair in such an intense manner. The executioner barely even had the time for one short scream of unimaginable pain before he was consumed from the inside out by the blazing fire Voldemort had ignited within him.

"Allowing a servant of mine that has failed to go unpunished is equally unacceptable," Voldemort commented as Macnair's charred remains slumped to the floor. Crimson eyes swept over the remaining Death Eaters as he asked expectantly, "Isn't it?"

"Yes, my lord!" they chorused, clearly terrified.

"Yes, I thought as much," Voldemort smiled thinly. He turned around, his black robes whipping from the movement. "Severus!"

Snape knelt low enough that his brow touched the floor. "My lord."

Voldemort considered the Potions Master for a moment. "Well?"

"The Weasley girl is currently in Hogwarts' Hospital Wing recovering. Potter is supposedly keeping watch over her," Snape reported crisply.

"Is she expected to live?"

Snape's lips curled into a grimace as he admitted, "Unfortunately."

"What of the Malfoy boy, Draco?" Voldemort asked. "I am given to understand that he somehow survived his encounter with Potter."

"Somehow, yes," confirmed Snape, "though Potter hasn't yet offered any explanation why this is so."

Voldemort mulled over this piece of information for several minutes. Snape remained perfectly still, waiting until the Dark Lord asked, "Is there any chance he might still prove useful to us?"

Snape risked a miniscule shrug. "Impossible to say, my lord, while he's still comatose. He was transferred to St. Mungo's early this evening, under heavy guard."

"Lucius... Macnair... Wormtail... all have failed me this day. I shall be needing servants I know that I can trust with any tasks I set them," Voldemort stated, beginning to prowl along the edge of the circle of Death Eaters while he spoke. After completing one full circuit he came to a halt immediately before Snape and asked, "Is the potion ready?"

"Nearly, my lord," admitted Snape with a crisp nod. "It will have reached the proper maturity by the next full moon."

Voldemort's thin lips curved into a malicious smile.

"Excellent."

Harry did not know what had awoken him from his vision, only that it was probably not Voldemort. He sat up in the chair which he had drifted to sleep in earlier, glancing at his wristwatch to check the time. A small pang filled his heart when he looked at the timepiece, painfully aware that it had been a gift from Ginny the previous year. It was just after one in the morning and Harry groaned at the realization that he had at some point drifted to sleep, in spite of his decision to keep watch over Ginny through the night.

It was annoying, particularly as his brief nap --he guessed it had been about half an hour-- had revealed just how tired the previous day's fight had made him. It was not often that the natural

Occlumency skills granted to Harry by the Order failed to hold up against the bond he shared with Voldemort. Only extreme exhaustion, or depletion of energy, could cause his mental defences to lower enough for such an intrusion to occur.

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An unexpected rustle of clothes from behind him almost made him leap from the chair and whirl around with his wand drawn, but a gentle hand on his shoulder prevented the action. He swivelled his head back and found himself looking up at the serene features of Hilary Proteus. Her husband, Gregory, was standing patiently at her side.

"Professors..." Harry began, moving to get up.

"Shh," Hilary stilled him, her hand still on his shoulder to keep him in place. With a smile she pointed to one side, where Molly and Arthur Weasley were sleeping. Hilary smiled and spoke in a whisper.

"We don't want to wake them, do we?"

Considering how worried and upset the two adults had been when Dumbledore had called for them to come to Hogwarts, Harry had to agree. Molly in particular had been very close to hysterical over the fact that her "little baby" had confronted Voldemort and nominally lost the encounter. Harry could only compare it to her reaction after Ginny had disappeared into the Chamber of Secrets in her first year, Harry's second, and he had gone in and brought her out.

Arthur had been considerably calmer than his wife, but was still visibly shaken by the narrowness of Ginny's escape from Voldemort and Pettigrew's clutches. He had been informed of the attack on the school while it was still in progress, one of the Aurors had passed the news on when the alarm sounded, and he had immediately Apparated from the Ministry to The Burrow. Suffice to say their worry had mounted considerably, bordering on panic, when the family clock, charmed to keep watch over the various members, had shown Ginny to be in *mortal peril*.

Once news came from Dumbledore, through the fireplace, that the battle was over and Ginny was alive and reasonably well, though unconscious from her ordeal, they had quickly rounded up the rest of the family and come straight to Hogwarts. The only Weasley that had not been able to join them was Charlie, who was on a mission for Dumbledore on the continent and thus unreachable. Bill, Percy and the twins, however, had accompanied their parents to the school.

It had taken the combined efforts of Dumbledore, Professor McGonagall, Madam Pomfrey as well as Harry to put their minds at rest, but eventually the point was driven home that Ginny was simply recovering from her ordeal - and not on the cusp of death as Molly feared. Once everything had settled down and night had fallen the brothers had been sent on their way, propelled by Molly's strident voice, leaving only Ginny's parents and Harry to watch over her.

"Here," said Gregory, quietly so as not to disturb either of the sleeping parents, presenting with a flourish something that looked suspiciously like a bottle of wine.

"What is it?" Harry asked, somewhat at a loss as he accepted the gift.

Gregory smiled rakishly. "A bottle."

"It's the wine they served at our wedding," elaborated Hilary, rolling her eyes at her husband and lightly elbowing him in the ribs. "Chateau Picard. A little dry, but it has a nice bouquet. We kept a few bottles for special occasions."

"Neither of us are wine drinkers, but it's an *excellent* vintage," added Gregory.

"Um... thanks," said Harry, somewhat at a loss as for what to say. He turned the bottle over in his hands and examined it. Running his thumb over the label he noticed that the date was illegible, obscured by a streak of some dark oil. He looked up at the watching professors and asked uncertainly, "What, uh, what year is it?"

Both Proteuses smiled mysteriously and Hilary answered, "A noteworthy one."

"So, why are you still here?" asked Gregory, settling down on the empty bed alongside Ginny's. "Why aren't you in bed and catching up on your sleep?"

"I won't leave her," Harry replied stubbornly, repeating what he had told Madam Pomfrey throughout the evening until she had finally relented and granted him permission to stay overnight.

"We could keep watch over her for a while, if you'd like," offered Hilary.

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"Thanks for the offer, but I'd prefer to stay," Harry declined graciously.

Gregory smirked faintly and asked teasingly, "Still finding it difficult to trust us, Harry?"

In spite of the teasing tone the professor used Harry still found himself flushing slightly with embarrassment and becoming flustered in his denials. He could not seem to decide whether to nod or shake his head, which did not help. "No, sir - I mean, yes... er... I don't know."

Hilary chuckled softly and noted, "You used to trust us--"

"Within limits," added Gregory.

"--before you overheard our discussion after your match against Ravenclaw."

"You knew I was..." Harry trailed off, mildly horrified to discover that his covert eavesdropping earlier in the year had not been as stealthy as he would have liked.

Hilary smiled sardonically and noted, "You went from trust to suspicion very quickly."

"I had good reason!"

"Mmm-hmm," hummed Gregory, sounding somewhat dubious. "D'you still doubt us?"

"I feel as though I'm becoming as paranoid as Mad-Eye Moody!" Harry exclaimed.

Gregory gave a subdued bark of laughter and slapped his thigh as he merrily rejoined, "That's the spirit! Constant vigilance!"

"What's bothering you, Harry?" asked Hilary, after giving her husband a pointed look and motioned for him to keep it down so as not to further disturb Arthur and Molly, who had stirred slightly. Once

Gregory had made the appropriate placating motions and silently apologised, she turned but to Harry, who was visibly distracted.

"I was... surprised... when you joined the fight," he admitted, slightly abashed.

Gregory chortled softly. "Shocked would be a better description."

Harry sighed and apologised for having doubted their allegiance. "I'm sorry I was so abrupt with you before."

Hilary smiled benevolently and waved the matter aside. "Perfectly understandable."

"Just don't let it happen again," cautioned Gregory teasingly.

"Somehow I don't think that will be a problem, love," Hilary noted wryly.

"True, I suppose," he agreed after a moment of consideration. He looked at Harry and elaborated,

"After all, it's not very likely we'll be seeing you again once this year's finished."

Harry sat up straighter. "You're not coming back?"

"Of course we're not," chuckled Hilary, as though he had suggested something positively ridiculous.

She shook her head and wagged a finger at him. "You should know by now, dear, that nobody holds the Defence Against the Dark Arts position for more than one year at a go. Not even us."

"I'm sorry to hear that. You've been very good teachers," Harry told them with honest disappointment.

"You have no idea how true that is," she readily agreed. "Especially considering who you're getting next year."

Harry looked at them both and asked curiously, "You know who?"

Gregory shook his head and laughed under his breath, "No, not even Dumbledore is crazy enough to hire Voldemort."

It was several seconds before either Harry or Hilary caught his play on the words and it was Hilary that responded by jabbing her elbow into her husband's ribs for the umpteenth time that night. She frowned playfully at him, clearly resigned to his quirky sense of humour, and declared placidly,

"Idiot."

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"Here, this is for you and Ginny," Gregory announced suddenly. He reached into his robes and drew a gilt-edged envelope from the breast pocket of his shirt. He handed it to Harry and said, "Don't open it until you're ready."

"What's inside?" asked Harry, taking the envelope and looking it over. It was sealed by wax stamped with the Gryffindor crest and, as the older wizard had said, both his and Ginny's names were printed on its face in bold and flowing gold letters.

Hilary answered his question first, saying, "The past."

Gregory added, his lips curling in a wry smirk, "The present."

"The future," continued Hilary, a shadow of something Harry could not readily identify passing through her bright hazel eyes.

"And a little bit of everything in between," Gregory concluded, his wry smirk melting into a mischievous grin that Harry was more accustomed to seeing on Fred and George rather than any of his professors.

He looked down at the envelope in his hands and asked, "So... when should I open it?"

Hilary answered, "When the time is right."

"When exactly will that be?" he asked, brow puckering unhappily at the vague reply.

"I'll tell you that the day I change my hair colour," retorted Hilary, patting him on the shoulder as she smiled just as impishly as her husband - perhaps even more so.

"Don't worry about it," assuaged Gregory, rising to his feet. "You'll know when it's time."

Hilary stood up to join Gregory, clearing preparing to take their leave and return to their quarters in the staff wing of the castle. "We'll see you in class, Harry. Try to get some rest in the meanwhile."

Gregory snorted and joked, "Believe me, you'll need it - Ginny's O.W.Ls are coming up soon."

The smack of Hilary's elbow connecting with his ribs, followed by Gregory's mock exclamation of pain, was loud enough to stir Arthur and Molly from their slumber. Harry couldn't help but laugh as his Defence professors almost fell over each other in their attempts of apologise.

Consciousness returned to Ginny gradually, creeping up on her so that she was unable to pin down the exact moment that she awoke. Yawning in protest against having to get up she slowly blinked her eyes open, wincing slightly against the brightness of the sunlight streaming in through the infirmary windows opposite where she was lying in bed. Licking her lips and swallowing in an attempt to alleviate the dryness in her mouth, she turned to look to her right, where she could feel a familiar presence.

"Good morning," the only other visible occupant of the Hospital Wing greeted her, leaning forward so that he could reach over and take both of her hands in his own.

"Harry," she both identified and replied.

He smiled with visible relief and asked, "How are you feeling?"

"Sore as the dickens," she replied, shifting uncomfortably about the bed. She shook her head ruefully and observed, "I never knew how many muscles the human body has. Now I can count each and every one of them individually."

"Ouch."

"Yeah," Ginny agreed, struggling into a sitting position. She looked at Harry and smiled sadly back at him and admitted, "I guess you would know better than most people would."

"Unfortunately," he readily agreed. He breathed deeply and exhaled. "That's probably why I was so worried."

Ginny gave his hands a reassuring squeeze and asked, "How bad was it?"

Harry shook his head gravely. "More than I'm comfortable with. If it weren't for the Order's regenerative abilities, you would have suffered a great deal of nerve fibre damage. As it is Madam Pomfrey has decided not to let you out of here for a while."

"How long?"

"A week to ten days she said," Harry told her, his tone a tad scolding as he released Ginny's hands to pull at and straighten her rumpled bed sheets.

This was news that Ginny considered even worse than the dull ache which seemed to encompass her entire body. Staying in the Hospital Wing, under the rather dubious care of Madam Pomfrey, was not very high on her "to do" list. She was just beginning to work herself into a mood of equally mixed outrage and grumpiness when her attention was drawn to Harry. Ginny eyed her boyfriend, immediately noticing the shadows that were starting to form beneath his eyes, as well as the tautness of his mouth.

"You stayed up all night, didn't you?"

"Not *all* night," he admitted.

"Oh, Harry," breathed Ginny, suddenly distressed at this realization of how concerned for her he had been.

Harry sighed and laced his fingers with Ginny's, gripping her hand tightly, and admitted, "I came disturbingly close to losing you yesterday, Gin. It scared me more than anything else I've ever been through."

Ginny smiled crookedly and squeezed his hand. "Don't fret, Harry. Like you, I have an excellent sense of direction."

~It's not easy~ he said silently, clearly still on edge.

That's our life right now, Harry, she replied, squeezing his hand in comfort once again. She attempted to lighten the mood by grinning mischievously and observing, "Besides, I think you're just like your dad in that regard. You enjoy the adrenaline rush."

"I did *not* enjoy yesterday," countered Harry unhappily.

"Come to think of it, neither did I," Ginny had to admit. She shifted about in an attempt to find a more comfortable position and asked, "How is everyone?"

"Your parents are here, but Madam Pomfrey ordered them go and have breakfast," he told her with a slightly tired grin. "Your mum put up quite a fight and refused to leave unless I was allowed to stay behind to keep an eye on you."

"The Hospital Wing seems a bit empty. Aside from me that is," she noted, looking around. "I guess that means there weren't too many injuries."

"For the most part," Harry agreed, his voice clearly being kept carefully neutral as was his expression.

"None of the students or Professors were hurt."

It was not difficult for Ginny to pick up the omission.

"The Aurors."

"Three fatalities," admitted Harry gravely.

"Oh no," Ginny exhaled, feeling her stomach knot at the news. "Who?"

Harry pursed his lips, trying to be dispassionate about what he was saying, but Ginny could see how his jaw tensed and could hear the slight catch in his voice as he spoke. "Boyle and Pembry. Both by stray Killing Curses. Wyman was hit by something that ruptured most of his organs. He didn't make it through the night."

Ginny grimaced and cursed, "Damn. Anything else?"

"Just the usual bumps, bruises and broken bones you'd expect from a fight like that. I think one of the centaurs might've been hurt, but they didn't come here afterwards and Firenze didn't say anything. None of the merpeople were injured. At least not that I saw - I brought you straight here."

"Malfoy?" she asked, her memories of her own worry over Harry's face-to-face encounter with the Well of Shadows coming vividly back to her.

"No sign of Lucius. Draco literally wiped him from existence," Harry answered with a shrug. He settled back in his chair, a pensive expression on his face. "As for Draco..."

Ginny was mildly surprised and asked, "He's alive?"

Harry flashed her a humourless smile and said, "I would say he'll rue not having died, but pretty soon he won't rue much."

"Because of what happened during the dispersal?" she asked, pausing to surrender to a long and deep yawn which had suddenly crept up on her. Clearly, if the slowness of her thoughts was any indication, she was still a bit out of it. "Scuse me. There was something odd about it."

"As near as we can tell--"

It's more of an educated guess really, put in Osiris.

--the energies involved--"

Both by the Well itself and the trap's attempt at dispersal, elaborated Merlin.

--have caused irreparable damage to his brain's neural pathways," Harry continued to explain, ignoring the momentary interruptions by the members of the Order. Now that Ginny was finally awake they were returning to their normal talkative selves. "Since the shadows are no longer present built to bolster their functioning, they're beginning to degrade."

"His mind is going to fall apart, isn't it? Slowly unravel until he's reduced to a state of mindlessness. A vegetable in a padded cell," Ginny concluded, collating the information the various Order members

were silently passing on to her. She had not had as many encounters with Draco as Harry, but what few experiences she'd had did not endear the Slytherin youth to her. Still, such a fate was not one she would have wished upon him. Even if he had been an arrogant little brat whose selfish ambitions, and those of his father, had caused so much harm to those she cared for. "Poor bastard."

Harry sighed tiredly, slumping a bit in his chair, and elaborated, "Dumbledore and Madam Pomfrey had a team of Aurors escort him to St. Mungo's. Under heavy sedation the whole time, of course, and enough magical inhibitors and restraints that even the two of us would have a hard time breaking free." Ginny mulled over that for a moment before asking, "No side of any shadows in him?"

He shook his head. "Aside from the gradual disintegration of his mind there's nothing to show that he was ever the Well of Shadows. All the physical changes made by the Well have been undone. Even the colour of his hair's back to normal."

"What does the Minist--" she began to ask, but broke off as another deep yawn sneaked up on her. She leaned back against her pillows, blinking wearily and apologised, "Sorry again, I'm still tired."

"Lie back then. Conserve your strength," Harry told her, releasing his hold on her hand and reaching over to brush several locks of her hair, which dangled around her face, back into position.

As she settled back, sinking lower into the bed, she asked, "Harry, do you ever see things? Y'know... when you almost die?"

"Sometimes," he admitted. An expression of mixed curiosity and worry flashed over his tired features as he focused on Ginny and asked, "What did you see?"

"I think I saw Elvis."

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25. Loose Ends

The sun was low in the sky above the blackened and torn remnants of the Forbidden Forest, its light tinted almost blood red as it streamed through the pall of ash which hung in the air. It was possibly one of the most magnificent approaching sunsets to fall over Hogwarts in centuries, possibly the only positive result of the Well of Shadows' destructive passage through the forest the previous day.

It was quieter than normal inside the castle, the proverbial calm had which settled over the school following Voldemort's failed siege. The deserted corridors were literally hauntingly silent, disturbed only by the occasional ghost and the soft rap of two pairs of dragon hide boots echoing off the stone as Gregory and Hilary Proteus strode purposefully down the hallway.

"You have the sunglasses?" asked Hilary as they walked.

"Yes, in my inside pocket," Gregory replied in a tone that suggested this was not the first time she had asked that question of him. Still, he patted his chest where a pair of stylish sunglasses rested securely in his robes.

"Are you certain we charmed them correctly?" she pressed.

"Yes."

Hilary took a deep and worried breath. "I hope we set it up properly."

"We did. Don't worry so much," Gregory tried to reassure her.

"Don't worry?" Hilary looked at him in askance. "If we've made a mistake he's going to end up with all the brains of a turnip."

"He didn't, so he won't," he said forcibly, coming to an abrupt halt as the two professors found themselves standing in front of one of Hogwarts' many stone gargoyles. Gregory looked at his wife and asked, "What's the password again?"

"Mars Bars," she both answered and told the gargoyle.

With a brisk nod of his horned head the guardian of the entrance leading to the headmaster's office shifted to the side and allowed them to enter. Stepping onto the winding staircase, which still reminded Gregory of a Muggle escalator.

As they began to ascend he glanced over his shoulder, watching as the gargoyle resumed his post, and chuckled softly. "At least he's not scared of us anymore."

"Only because he doesn't recognise us," replied Hilary dryly. She shook her head. "When I visited Minerva before we left, he practically tripped over himself trying to get out of my way."

"Poor Bob. We really should apologise when we get back," decided Gregory, reaching out to rap firmly on the oak door at the top of the staircase.

"Come in," Dumbledore's voice called out.

Opening the door and stepping into the headmaster's office, the two Defence professors saw that Dumbledore was currently in a meeting. He was sitting behind his massive desk and speaking with two wizards who turned in their seats to regard them.

Dumbledore smiled and waved them across the threshold. "Ah, Gregory, Hilary. Please, do come in."

"Thank you, Albus."

"I believe some introductions are in order. This is Alastor Moody," said Dumbledore, indicating at first one of his guest and then the other, "and Johann Jäger."

"We both know Mister Moody," said Gregory, extending his hand in greeting to Moody as the retired Auror rose from his seat, "at least by reputation."

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Hilary focused her attention on the second wizard, who had also risen to his feet. Jäger was a tall and solidly built man, looking more like a professional heavyweight boxer than anything else. He had stormy blue eyes, a neatly trimmed goatee and long blonde hair, starting to grey at the temples, which was pulled into a ponytail. A wicked-looking scar, able to match any of the ones sported by Moody, sliced across his left cheek, down his chin and curling down his neck and beneath his collar. Shaking the hand which he offered to her, she asked politely, "You're an Auror, aren't you, Mister Jäger?"

"That I am," he confirmed in a deep baritone, with a slight German accent.

"Retired," growled Moody, dropping back into his chair.

"Johann used to work for the German Ministry of Magic up until several years ago," Dumbledore told them.

Jäger nodded and returned to his seat. "Ja. Now I am working with Alastor there--" he jerked a thumb in Moody's direction "--doing work as a security consultant here in England."

"Alastor and Johann have been brought in at the school governors' behest; to evaluate Hogwarts and make recommendations to prevent any future sieges similar to the one we recently weathered," explained Dumbledore.

"Good to hear," said Gregory.

"Yes, the school can always use additional protection," agreed Hilary readily. "You can never be too prepared, after all."

"Exactly," Moody growl, slapping one hand against his wooden leg. "*Constant vigilance!*"

Jäger looked very much as if he wanted to roll his eyes at this proclamation, but settled with elaborating, "We've begun drawing up plans for any foreseeable situation that might affect the school."

Gregory looked at him, a twinkle of amusement sparking in his eyes, and asked, "Really? Any foreseeable situation?"

"Ja, Professor," Jäger said with a firm nod.

"Do you have a plan to deal with illegal time travelling students from the future?"

Jäger, surprisingly enough, didn't even blink. Instead he nodded once again and confirmed in a matter of fact tone, "Of course."

Hilary's lips twitched as she stifled a smile and said, "I'd love to see whatever plans you've got drawn up for *that* situation."

"I'm afraid that's confidential," replied Jäger sternly, "unless Professor Dumbledore says otherwise."

Dumbledore repressed his own bemused smile more successfully than Hilary, but he could not stop his eyes from sparkling with humour. He reached into his robes and withdrew an intricate golden pocket watch. "It would seem that our time is up for this afternoon, gentlemen. I will be keeping in touch with you, of course, but for the moment I must speak with my colleagues here on several matters pertaining to our students."

Moody rose from his seat once again. "Right, we'll be off then."

Jäger also nodded as he moved to the door. "Ja, good day to you all."

"Come along, you bloody kraut," Moody directed as he limped to the office door and swung it open. "I want to make one quick sweep of the grounds along what's left of the Forbidden Forest before we leave."

"I am right behind you, you pompous English ass," replied Jäger evenly, as he brushed past Moody and began to descend the winding staircase. Moody did not look pleased at this, his magical eye twirling around in its socket with agitation, but said nothing he shut the door behind him and followed Jäger down.

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Dumbledore, Gregory and Hilary waited patiently as the two wizards exited the office, keeping quiet until they were sure that they were alone. Then Hilary turned to Gregory with an impish grin and said, "So, they have *a plan*, do they?"

Gregory matched her grin with one of his own and offered her a seat. "To deal with anyone who gets it into their heads to time travel."

"Namely us," she noted as she sat down.

"A bit late, aren't they?" he asked, sitting in the chair next to her.

Hilary laughed lightly and proposed jokingly, "If they ask nicely maybe we could give them pointers on how to get somewhere *on time*."

Dumbledore settled back in his plush armchair, lips curling up in a smile. "Johann and Alastor were contemporaries during their career days. They worked together on several occasions and both think very highly of each other – though they will never dare admit as much."

"It's reassuring to know that we have allies from overseas, even if they are retired," agreed Gregory.

"Charlie Weasley was very helpful in that regard; gathering what support he could. As was Remus Lupin, before I brought him back to Hogwarts to teach last year," Dumbledore readily admitted. He looked at the two young professors sitting opposite him. "Have you met Johann before?"

"No, we've met him after," replied Hilary.

"In Auckland, a couple of years from now, actually," added Gregory.

Dumbledore arched an eyebrow and asked, "What will you be doing in New Zealand?"

Gregory sighed and shook his head. "It's a long story."

"Aren't they all?"

Hilary smirked. "At least then he won't be wasting his time trying to work out ways to stop time travelling students from the future. He'll have far more pressing matters on his hands."

Dumbledore leaned forward and asked curiously, "Are you still studying at Hogwarts?"

Hilary shook her head. "No, why do you ask?"

"That's the second time you've referred to yourselves as 'time travelling *students*'."

"We'll always be students of some kind, Albus," Gregory said. "After all, from beginning to end, life is a learning experience."

"Quite true, I suppose," Dumbledore agreed. Clearing his throat he clearly decided to get down to business and asked, "So, what did you wish to see me about?"

Hilary shot her husband both a reproachful and at the same time endearing glance and answered,

"Since Harry's barricaded himself in the Hospital Wing with Ginny, we thought we'd be the ones to inform you that the magical energies surrounding and comprising Hogwarts have finally begun to settle down."

"Ah, yes, I had wondered when things would return to normal," admitted Dumbledore. He pointed at a book sitting to one side of his desk. "Just an hour ago I tried to conjure up a tea tray for my guests and produced a Yoga instruction manual instead."

"The magic in the castle has been rather mixed up," confessed Gregory. He winced slightly and added, "It's our fault, I'm afraid, but we had to do it because we had already done it."

"How are you responsible for it?" asked Dumbledore with interest.

"We interfered quite a bit with things," Hilary divulged quietly, looking down at her hands.

"The centaurs," Gregory explained, "the merpeople."

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Dumbledore nodded thoughtfully. "Yes, I was surprised to learn that the two of you could speak Mermish."

"I can't," corrected Hilary ruefully. She shot Gregory another look, this one a bit more teasing than the first. "He's the one with the 'gift' for languages."

"It's a dirty job, but somebody has to," he countered sardonically. "Naturally my name was first on the list for dirty jobs."

"Your name's always first on the list for dirty jobs."

Gregory shrugged. "It's a short list."

Hilary nodded in agreement and, not very subtly prodded Gregory's ribs with her elbow. He looked at her in confusion for a second before understanding her message. Snapping his fingers he began digging around inside his robes. "Oh, I almost forgot. We passed Fred and George on our way here. They were going to visit Ginny in the Hospital Wing and asked us to give these to you."

"Indeed?" asked Dumbledore, raising his eyebrows as Gregory held out a pair of sunglasses.

"The latest model Omnitacles, courtesy of Weasley's Wizard Wheezes," Hilary explained. "They're going to be opening their shop in Diagon Alley at the end of the month, so they're handing out examples of their merchandise as a promotional advertising campaign."

"Percy's idea, surprisingly enough."

"Yeah, he was even more disapproving of the twins' business than Mum was."

Gregory handed the Omnitacles to Dumbledore, who held them up and examined them. He turned them this way and that, admiring the sleek lines. "Ah yes, I've seen several students wearing these at the last couple of Quidditch matches this season."

"Try them on," prompted Gregory. "I'm sure they'll look good on you."

"They are very stylish, aren't they?" Dumbledore agreed, removing his gold-rimmed half-moon spectacles and carefully setting them down on his desk. He unfolded the Omnitacles and slipped them on, sliding them up the length of his crooked nose until they sat snugly. He looked at Gregory and Hilary, clearly awaiting their appraisal of his appearance.

Hilary nodded her approval and grinned. "Wicked, professor. They suit you."

"Are they working all right?" asked Gregory.

"Let me see," said Dumbledore, reaching up to tap on the polished bronze stud moulded into the side of the Omnitacles.

The brief flash of light, which encompassed the Omnitacles the moment after Dumbledore had pressed the activation stud, caused Gregory and Hilary to wince and turn away slightly. It was rather like having Colin Creevey setting off his camera right in their faces, only with a strange sucking noise rather than the click and whirl of film.

Blinking away the afterimages caused by the light the two professors looked to where Dumbledore was seated, perfectly immobile. Gregory pushed himself out of his chair and reached over the large desk to remove the specially doctored Omnitacles from the headmaster. He took in Dumbledore's now slack features and blank --staring into space-- eyes.

"I told you they'd work without a hitch," he said, slipping the sunglasses back into his pocket. He picked up Dumbledore's half-moon spectacles and placed them back on the headmaster, perching them just short of the tip of his long nose.

"It's a pity though," murmured Hilary as Gregory returned to his seat. "That his knowledge and memories of who we really are has been erased, I mean."

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"We couldn't risk it, you know that," he told her, reaching out to take one of her hands in his to give a comforting squeeze. "If he didn't react the same way as everyone else it could disrupt how everything turns out. Especially considering how precarious next year's situation will be even without any interference."

Hilary nodded in pensive agreement before asking, "How long d'you think he'll be like this?"

Gregory shrugged. "Not long. A few more seconds."

"Ah, excuse me. I fear I lost myself wool-gathering for a moment," Dumbledore abruptly said a moment or two later, jerking upright as if suddenly waking from a daydream. Clearing his throat he settled back in his plush chair and asked, "So, what did you wish to see me about?"

Hilary exchanged a look with Gregory, both professors masterfully hiding their feelings. She turned to Dumbledore and asked, "We were curious to know if you would be able to tell us when things are going to settle down again? Magically speaking, I mean."

"Ah, yes, I have wondered when things would return to normal, myself," admitted Dumbledore. He pointed at the book that was still sitting to one side of his desk. "Just an hour ago I tried to conjure up

a tea tray for my guests and produced a Yoga instruction manual instead."

"The magic in the castle has been rather mixed up," agreed Gregory, without any hint entering his voice that this was not the first time he said as much. He paused briefly and then suggested, "Perhaps it would help if Mister Potter were to make a sweep of the grounds and try to smooth the energy flows back into their proper courses."

"Assuming he can do that, of course," added Hilary, deliberately making herself sound a little doubtful. "Nobody really knows the full extents of his, or Ginny Weasley's, abilities."

Gregory shrugged with practiced nonchalance, "Still, wouldn't hurt to ask, I suppose."

Dumbledore stroked his beard thoughtfully and nodded. "I shall discuss the idea with Mister Potter after dinner."

"You'll have to wait until tomorrow, to speak with him. He's going to miss dinner tonight, I'm afraid," Gregory noted.

"What do you mean, Professor?" asked Dumbledore.

Gregory's smile was a humourless one. "He's slipped out to visit an old acquaintance."

SPELL DAMAGE Fourth floor

Unlifiable jinxes, hexes, incorrectly applied charms, etc.

Harry looked over the sign marking the floor he had just stepped onto, confirming that he had arrived at the right place. He had been, even with his sense of magic, somewhat worried that he had maybe Apparated to the wrong place when he had arrived earlier only to find that St. Mungo's appeared to be a derelict department store called Purge & Dowse Ltd.

Reassured from the sign that he had reached his destination, Harry began searching for the ward the enquiries desk had directed him to. As he had become accustomed to the wizarding world Harry was not overly surprised that St. Mungo's did not even remotely resemble a Muggle Hospital, save for the quiet hustle and bustle of the various Healers and their assistants.

"Mister Potter, I came as soon as I heard you'd arrived," called a short, rotund old witch that looked vaguely similar to his Herbology professor. The Healer hurried along the narrow corridor until she was able to introduce herself in a more subdued voice. "I'm Miriam Strout, the Healer in charge of the Spell Damage wing."

"Pleased to meet you," Harry said, shaking her hand.

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Strout bobbed her head up and down. "I understand you wish to speak with the patient Professor Dumbledore sent here yesterday evening."

Harry nodded. "If he's awake, yes."

"He's awake," Strout confirmed, sounding rueful of the fact. "The nasty little bugger's given my staff and me nothing but grief from practically the moment he opened his eyes."

"Malfoy has that effect on people," agreed Harry, starting to walk down the hallway, Strout follow at his side.

"It's a wonder then that anybody tried to save his life," Strout muttered, struggling to keep up with Harry's longer strides.

Slowing his pace somewhat, Harry wryly admitted, "Accidents do happen."

Strout didn't quite smile, but her lips twitched a fraction upwards as she nodded. "Quite true, Mister Potter, quite true. We simply have to try and live with them afterwards. However, if he doesn't start behaving himself and treating my people with the respect they're due, I will be very tempted to try and *correct* the particular mistake that is Draco Malfoy."

"He shouldn't be bothering you for much longer."

"Yes, you're right about that as well," she agreed. "I shouldn't be surprised that you're aware of his condition."

"Actually," Harry confessed, "I'm the one who diagnosed his condition."

Strout looked at him in surprise. Harry was about to explain how he had used his ability to read magic to analyze the effects dispersing the Well of Shadows had triggered within Draco. At that moment, however, he caught sight of something --or rather someone-- as they walked past one ward that had its door open. It was all Harry could do not to lose a beat in his stride, though he did slow down slightly as the view registered.

There, his blonde hair as coifed and stylish as ever, teeth sparkling white as he beamed benevolently, was Gilderoy Lockhart. The former Hogwarts professor, was sitting at a small desk next to what must have been his bed, dressed in a flowing lilac dressing gown of all things, and was apparently signing his way through a stack of promotional photographs of himself. He was whistling a jaunty, if somewhat off-key, tune as he scratched away with his battered peacock feather quill.

Well, I guess it's true that some things never change, Harry decided, a certain amount of wry humour rising within him. Shaking off his momentary distraction at the sight, which he put it in the back of his mind as something to tell Ginny when he got back to Hogwarts, he picked up his pace once again.

Strout, who had not noticed anything amiss, had been talking for several seconds.

"--tried almost everything we know of, even flooded some specialists from the Helvetian Institute in Geneva," she was saying as Harry focused his attention on the stocky Healer. "Nobody, however, had the foggiest notion about how we can help the boy."

"You probably won't be able to find anything," Harry said as they turned a corner to another corridor.

"Even magic has its limits and synaptic degradation is one of them."

Strout nodded in agreement, but still protested, "Yes, but none of us can figure out *why* his neural

pathways are almost literally crumbling into so much dust. At a phenomenal rate as well, I might add." Harry frowned, "That I don't know either. Although I do have a few suspicions."

"I see," Strout said in a tone that clearly said she did not in fact see.

Harry came to a halt and nodded his head towards the nearest door, which had a pair of bored-looking Aurors standing guard outside it.

"Is this the room?" he asked.

Strout blinked and, after glancing at the two Aurors, nodded. "Why, yes, it is."

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Harry inclined his head and requested, "I'd appreciate it if we weren't disturbed."

"Certainly."

"Thank you, Healer Strout," he said, before turning to the door and stepping up to it. The Aurors standing watch were actually supposed to be stationed at Hogwarts. He looked at them, a little surprised, and asked, "Tom, Dick, what are the two of you doing here? Shouldn't you be at the school?"

"We should, yeah," agreed Thomas Harding, sounding mildly annoyed by the fact that he and his partner were at St. Mungo's rather than their assigned post. "Idaho had us come here instead, though." Richard Faulkner explained, "Apparently the Ministry's being an ass about assigning someone to guard Malfoy, so until they do we're stuck with keeping an eye on him."

Harding crossed his arms and leaned back against the wall. "We only came on duty here about an hour ago – before us it was Kit Walker and Diana Palmer on watch."

"I wonder why Fudge is causing trouble over this," Harry mused to himself. Taking hold of the door handle he asked, "Malfoy hasn't been causing any trouble, has he?"

"Trouble's about the only thing that runt is good for," complained Harding.

Faulkner elaborated, "He's done nothing but bellyache at the Healers over every little thing; from the quality of his bed sheets to the colour of the ceiling. You'd think he had nothing better to worry about."

Harry chuckled humourlessly, opened the door and stepped inside, "He's always been like that."

"Ah, look who's come to dinner," announced a familiar voice. "Are you here to kill me, Potter?"

"No," Harry answered, closing the door behind him and walking towards the solitary bed and its occupant.

Draco sneered and struggled unsuccessfully to sit upright. "Too much of a coward to do what's necessary, is that it?"

Harry shook his head. "You are going to die, Malfoy, but not today."

"And why's that?" Draco asked snidely.

"Because Heaven wants nothing to do with you," replied Harry, pulling up a chair and sitting down next to the bed, "and Hell's afraid you'll take over the place."

"How eloquent."

Looking at the sole surviving Malfoy --sole surviving male that is-- Harry quickly confirmed the evaluation he had made the day before at Hogwarts. Draco was completely free, if the term could be applied, of any trace of having been the Well of Shadows. His hair, which had darkened to a jet-black under the Well's influence, was once again a silvery blonde. His eyes, only yesterday as dark and bottomless as the pits of Hell itself, had returned to their normal steely grey. His skin had lost its shimmering translucence and regained some of its natural pallor. Still, in spite of these changes, Draco did not look healthy.

"I hear your heart stopped for a short time yesterday," Harry said after they had sat, or in Draco's case lain (he was secured to the bed with thick magical bindings), silently for several minutes.

"Yes," Draco confirmed, sounding surprisingly amiable. "According to the Healers I was dead for nearly a minute."

"Liberating, isn't it?"

"You know," Draco seemed to ponder the idea, "in a way, it was."

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Harry lapsed into silence once again, not really sure how he could approach Draco with the reason he had come here. The various Members of the Order had supplied a wide assortment of suggestions and idea, but none seemed right to him at the moment. Fortunately, however, Draco solved the problem for him.

"So, what brings you out to visit St. Mungo's resident psychopath?"

"You're not a psychopath, Malfoy. You're a sociopath," Harry corrected him.

"What's the difference?"

"A psychopath can't tell the difference between right and wrong."

Draco arched one silvery eyebrow and concluded, "So I'm guessing that a sociopath can."

Harry nodded. "Yes, he just doesn't give a damn."

"I'm a much more complicated wizard than you give me credit for, Potter," replied Draco quietly, but with a dangerous glint in his eyes.

"Really," said Harry, his scepticism clearly audible.

"My mind may be falling apart, bit by bit," Draco declared arrogantly, "but I was so smart to begin with it's unlikely anyone will be able to notice."

Harry snorted, not particularly surprised that his school time nemesis was acting in such a way, even after everything that had happened to him. "I see your modesty isn't suffering the same degradation."

This time Draco snorted scornfully. "I have no need for false modesty, Potter. Every great leader -- great conqueror-- has managed to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat at least once. Caesar, Alexander, Napoleon..."

"Considering the outcome of Waterloo," Harry noted, "Napoleon was not a particularly wise choice to model yourself after, Malfoy."

"Ah, but I'm smarter than he was. And taller."

"Not by much."

Draco scowled unhappily and glared impatiently at Harry. "Did you come all this way from Hogwarts just to insult me, Potter?"

"Sorry, old habits die hard," Harry reluctantly apologised. Having just had the opportunity dropped in his lap, he began to explain the reason for his visit. "I need your help."

"Then I need a drink," proclaimed Draco mockingly.

"The reason I'm here, Malfoy, is to make a deal."

Draco actually blinked in disbelief. "I'll be damned."

Harry could help but smirk and quip, "Too late."

"Not to worry, God will forgive me," Draco said with remarkable assurance. "That's his job."

Pushing the chair back Harry stood up and anxiously began pacing around the ward. It was not a good room to pace in, affording him only a handful of steps either direction, but it gave him a way to work off his agitation.

He looked demandingly at Draco and asked, "Is this really the way you want it to end, Malfoy? Not with a bang but a whimper?"

Draco sniggered, "What d'you think you're going to do? Save me somehow?"

"I can't save you, Malfoy. Nothing can save you now," Harry told him bluntly. "Within a month, maybe less, there'll be nothing left of you but a mindless shell."

"Then what are you proposing?" asked Draco, his curiosity piqued.

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"Your father was Voldemort's right hand man, or close to it."

Draco nodded, a thin smile on his lips. "Before I killed him, yes."

Harry pushed on, "It stands to reason then, that you should be well acquainted with the other Death Eaters and maybe even Voldemort's plans for the future."

"You want to me to spill my guts, is that it?" Draco asked incredulously.

"I'm asking you to share whatever information you have with me," Harry told him.

"Why? So that I can be redeemed? Pardoned of my crimes?"

"That's unlikely to ever happen, Draco," said Harry, struggling to keep his voice level. Draco was clearly not going to cooperate, Harry could see that already, but if there was even the remotest chance of prying information out of him before his mind completely went, then Harry had to make the attempt. "But helping me is the closest you're ever going to get to revenge on Voldemort and your father for doing this to you."

Draco laughed darkly, a sound that set Harry's teeth on edge and sent an uncomfortable shiver running up his spine. "I've already taken my vengeance on my father - he's dead, in case you missed the fact.

As for Voldemort, he's as good as dead."

Harry froze.

"He is?"

"Yes, he is. The fool thought that he could perform the change in me with impunity."

"What d'you mean?"

"You can't simply create a Well of Shadows in *someone else*, Potty," Draco explained, pitching his voice as if he were speaking to a particularly slow child. "That's not the way it's supposed to work, though Voldemort tried his damndest to arrange it that way."

Harry stood perfectly still and considered this. The implications of what Draco was saying were both disturbing and (in a way) heartening. "Are you saying that, in the process of changing you into the Well, Voldemort somehow... corrupted himself?"

"And Potter catches the Snitch at last," Draco announced mockingly. If his hands had not been strapped to the bed he would surely have lifted them up and applauded. "Yes... Voldemort is slowly being eaten away by the shadows --just as I was-- only on a physical level rather than a mental one. It's really quite obvious, if you look properly."

Sweet heavens, Harry thought, *could he be telling the truth about that? If he is...*

Draco continued, his voice turning from mockery to threatening. His eyes fixed on Harry and he practically snarled, "Which means the only people left that I want vengeance upon for my current condition is you and that red-haired slut you're sleeping with."

Harry felt his lips compressing into a thin line, both from the threat and the slur against Ginny. He lifted his chin a fraction, struggling not to let his emotions show, and spoke with a professional coolness. "I'll take that as a 'no', shall I?"

His only reply was a smirk that seemed equally condescending and menacing. Forcing his jaw to relax, lest his teeth began to audibly grind together, Harry strode away from the bed and to the closed door.

"In that case, goodbye," he said, twisting the handle and looking over his shoulder. "I doubt we will see each other again. Ever."

"I wouldn't be too sure of that, Potter," Draco told him confidently. "Don't fool yourself for even a minute that I'm going down without a fight. I'll find a way to take what I want from you - be sure of it."

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Not bothering to respond, Harry pulled the door open and stepped outside without a backward glance. Not even bothering to close the door, leaving it to the Aurors guarding the ward, he marched down the narrow passage to where the elevator was, trying not to dwell on Draco's last words.

He'd better be wrong about that, he thought to himself. For all our sakes.
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26. Quite a bit of Quiet

Ginny was contemplating the ceiling of the Hospital Wing. Not that there was much to contemplate, but there was little else for her to do, incarcerated as she was. Madam Pomfrey had, in no uncertain terms, demanded that Ginny remain in bed until all trace of the injuries she had sustained during her encounter with Voldemort had disappeared. Despite her protests, some quite loud and vehement, Ginny's parents had consented to the decision and thus left her in Madam Pomfrey's somewhat overzealous care.

It had been nearly two weeks.

Having spent most of her life living with six elder brothers, particularly Fred and George, Ginny had never truly experienced the kind of boredom she was currently suffering through. After all, you could only stare up at the ceiling --which was rather bland to begin with-- for so long before there wasn't anything new about it to examine.

"So, how are you feeling?"

"Pretty much the same as I did the last time you asked," Ginny replied sourly, lowering her gaze from the ceiling to where Madam Pomfrey stood at the foot of her bed. She frowned unhappily. "And the time before that and the time before *that*."

"Well fortunately, for the both of us, it won't be much longer," Madam Pomfrey huffed, still a bit affronted by Ginny's frustration fuelled complaints, in spite of having been subjected to them for the better part of a week.

"It 'wasn't much longer' three days ago," Ginny grumbled, crossing her arms. "Two weeks trapped in this mausoleum is altogether too long."

"This is an infirmary, not the Gryffindor common room," asserted Pomfrey, walking away as it was obvious that her patient was not in need of anything other than to be discharged. "If you have a problem with the room's decor, Miss Weasley, take it up with the Founders."

Ginny stared at Pomfrey's retreating back and declared, "If I have to stay in here much longer, I just might."

"Quit whinging, Weasley," declared a voice from the infirmary entrance.

"I'm not whinging," Ginny protested, turning to greet her visitor.

Blaise Zabini smirked as she approached Ginny's bed. "Oh, yes you are."

Ginny uncrossed her arms and looked narrowly at Blaise. "I do *not* whinge!"

"I share a dormitory with Pansy Parkinson - I'm an expert at identifying whinging," Blaise asserted authoritatively. The blonde girl's smirk broadened. "You are whinging."

Ginny took a breath, preparing to counter Blaise's allegation, but instead flopped back against her pillows and crossed her arms once again. She knew that trying to argue with Blaise would be more invigorating than arguing with Madam Pomfrey, but at the same time it would also reveal just how completely bored out of her skull she was. Which would leave her open to more teasing from the quirky humoured Slytherin witch.

She shook her head and said, "I think you're delusional, but since you've come to visit me..."

"Who said I came to visit you? I'm actually here to ask Madam Pomfrey for a Contraceptive Potion; so that I won't be making you an aunt when I finally seduce your poor brothers, Fred and George," Blaise rejoined immediately, somehow managing to keep a straight face. "Still, if you need the company, I suppose I can stay a few minutes."

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Ginny felt her mouth drop open in utter disbelief. She consciously closed it with a snap, only to have it fall open again a moment later. She imagined that she looked somewhat reminiscent of a landed carp, but couldn't manage anything else.

"You are aware, aren't you," she asked after nearly a minute of gaping at Blaise, who had finally cracked a wicked smile, "that your sense of humour is positively sadistic at times?"

"Your brothers certainly seem to think so," Blaise agreed, grinning mischievously. "In fact, last time we spoke, they said that they actually admired it."

"Now I *know* you're delusional," Ginny announced. "Nobody in their right minds would take anything *any* of my brothers say with more than a pinch of salt, let alone Fred and George."

"Oh, you wound me," Blaise said, clapped both hands to her chest and miming a blow to the heart.

When Ginny's only reaction was to stick out her tongue, Blaise pulled up a chair. "I heard from Padma that Pomfrey is finally letting you out of here today."

Ginny nodded. "That's what she's been promising every hour for the last three days."

An amused cough from the side drew the girls' attention to the doors leading into the Hospital Wing. Harry was leaning against the doorframe and watching them with a grin. He pushed off and strode into the room, smiling at Blaise as he asked, "Hullo, Blaise. Keeping our bedridden heroine company?"

"Only because she scared off everyone else," Blaise replied blandly.

"I should have known better than to leave you alone," he told Ginny, coming up alongside her bed and leaning down to kiss her on the cheek. "Even if it was only for an hour."

Ginny scowled at him, not really unhappy about being teased like this, but deciding to act the part of a disgruntled patient. "After being stuck in the Hospital Wing for thirteen days, you're not exactly catching me at my best."

"No doubts about that," Blaise readily agreed.

"Hey!"

"How're you feeling?" asked Harry, perching himself on the edge of her bed.

Why do people keep asking me that? she thought to herself. She looked at Harry, who was watching her expectantly and said, "Madam Promfey thinks she might release me later today."

Blaise smirked. "I'm sure she will be delighted to finally be rid of you."

Ginny looked at Harry, hoping to have him defend her, but instead found that he seemed as amused by her circumstances as Blaise was. He looked across the bed to where Blaise was lounging in her chair and said, "You know you shouldn't provoke her, Blaise."

"Somebody has to lighten the mood," Blaise defended herself.

"When I get out of here - watch your back, Zabini. I'm going to get you for this," threatened Ginny, brandishing a fist at the other girl.

"Not in your wildest dreams, Weasley," countered Blaise smugly. She grinned and rose from her seat to leave. "I'll leave you two to yourselves now. Hopefully you'll both be in the Great Hall at dinner." Harry waved as she left. "Bye, Blaise."

"Grrr."

"So, how *are* you feeling?" asked Harry, looking at Ginny after she finished growling. Ginny was about to reply, but stopped. Instead she pressed her lips together, into a thin line, and crossed her arms for the umpteenth time that morning. Harry, noticing her slight frown, cocked his head to one side and asked, "Gin?"

"I'm going to be extremely rude to the next person who asks me that," she told him. "In fact I might just start cursing them. Literally."

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Harry chuckled softly in understanding. "I suppose you do get asked how you're feeling a lot, don't you?"

"It'd be better if I had a different answer to the bloody question," she replied, letting loose some of her aggravation. "Bored, frustrated and wanting to get out of this thrice-bedamned bed!"

"Well, hopefully it won't be much longer."

"Everyone keeps saying that as well," she complained, dropping her head into her hands. She could hear Harry stifling a snicker, so looked up to glare threateningly at him. "You think this is funny, don't you?"

Harry, openly laughing now, shook his head. "No, I think it's hilarious."

"Not surprising, Harry, since you get to run around enjoying life, whereas I've been stuck in bed for nearly two weeks!" Ginny protested bitterly, waving her arms about to encompass the bland interior of the Hospital Wing as she spoke.

"It's not my fault that you goaded Voldemort into trying to cook your brains with the Cruciatus Curse," defended Harry, pretending to be affronted by her accusation. "If you'd had a little more common sense you wouldn't have charged into the fray like that - it's a minor miracle he decided to torture you long enough for the Order and me to intervene. He could have killed you outright."

Ginny grit her teeth, but was unable to deny Harry's argument. Her actions during the siege had been incredibly stupid and shortsighted, regardless of the fact that Harry had been in grave danger at the time. Though she had been told many times in the intervening days, Ginny knew that such a response was an impulse she would never be able to curtail when it came to Harry's wellbeing. It was as much a part of her as breathing was and, even if it killed her, she would never hesitate to leap in harm's way where his safety was threatened.

"I know it was dumb luck that nothing worse happened to me," she admitted, only a hint of her disgruntlement at being constantly reminded of the fact entering her voice.

Harry's expression softened and he looked at her compassionately. "I know Gin," he said quietly, reaching out to grasp her hands, "and I know we've all been telling you about so from practically the moment you woke up, and every hour on the hour since then, but you honestly must understand how much you scared us."

Ginny nodded in acquiescence. "I know, Harry, I really do. You seem to forget, however, just how much *you* scared us last year when Tom attacked the castle. Or when your bastard uncle shot you at the start of summer holidays. Or after the attack over Christmas. You've scared us a heck of a lot more over the years than any of us ever have or ever will."

"Maybe," he agreed with a shrug. "Still, one advantage of having an Imperial Arch Griffin as my Animagus form is that it automatically uses the Order's magic to almost completely heal any injuries when I change."

"So while you get to escape this mortuary because you're an Animagus right out of wizarding mythology," Ginny concluded, less than thrilled by the idea, "I'm stuck in here for all eternity because I can only transform into a simple horse?"

"Looks that way," he grinned.

Ginny groaned, "Gods, I'm going to start climbing the walls before I get out of here."

"Not to worry, I brought some entertainment while we wait for you to be checked out."

"Oh? What?" she asked, sitting up and looking eagerly at him.

With a flourish more suitable for a Muggle stage magician than a real wizard, Harry reached into his school robes and produced a compact box.

"Cards," he elaborated, just in case Ginny had not recognised the deck of Exploding Snap cards that now rested in her lap.

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"I'm not in the mood for games, Harry," she told him.

"That's a pity," he said, feigning disappointment but failing to hide the wicked gleam that was flickering in his eyes, "because I know you'd've like the game I had in mind."

"Oh? What?"

Leaning over to whisper in her ear, Harry explained what he had planned to help pass the time until Ginny could be discharged. As he spoke the salacious grin he was wearing, grew broader in concert to Ginny's cheeks growing an increasingly bright red.

"So, Harry," asked Ron, "any idea what Dumbledore wants to tell you?"

"Not a clue," replied Harry as he, Ginny, Ron and Hermione were passing the school's Trophy Room on their way to meet the headmaster.

After Ginny had finally been released from the Hospital Wing by Madam Pomfrey, just in time for lunch, Professor McGonagall had come up to the Gryffindor table during the meal and informed Harry that he and his friends were expected by the headmaster in his office after dinner.

Hermione, walking on Ron's other side, prompted him for more. "You must have some idea."

"I'll admit to having a few educated guesses," he answered, his expression growing a little sombre as he ran through the list of possibilities. Unfortunately, it was a rather long list - not surprising considering Harry's hectic lifestyle and history. Fortunately, however, there was one item on the list which stood out far more than any of the others.

"What are they?" asked Ron eagerly.

"Back in our first year I wanted to know why Voldemort was so eager to kill me and my parents,"

Harry said, his expression changing from a sombre one to a dark one. The subject of his parents' deaths was not something Harry enjoyed contemplating. "He wouldn't tell me then so maybe now..."

"You really think so?" Ron's eagerness was almost setting Harry's teeth on edge, though he did not say anything. "The reason You-Know-Who tried to kill you?"

"Are you sure you want us with you, Harry?" asked Ginny quietly, clearly having picked up on his increasingly dark mood. She looked at him with concern, something of a turnaround considering the past couple of weeks, and suggested, "I mean, maybe you should hear what Dumbledore has to say by yourself and you can tell us about it later, if you want to."

Hermione quickly caught on, sharing a fretful look with Ron. Both of them understood how touchy a subject this could be for Harry. "She's got a point, Harry," she said, anxiously wringing her hands together. "We don't have to be here if you don't want us--"

"I want you here. All of you," he interrupted firmly.

"Thanks mate. It means a lot to us," said Ron, summing up the feelings of all three of Harry's companions with a simple heartfeltness.

Harry nodded in acknowledgement and at the same time stopped walking. "We're here."

Hermione looked from Harry to the grinning stone facade of Dumbledore's gargoyle and asked, "Do you know the password?"

"Yes," he nodded, turning to address the gargoyle. "Mars Bars."

The stone guardian stepped aside, revealing the winding staircase leading up to Dumbledore's office. The four students squeezed through the entrance left by the gargoyle, Harry and Ginny first, followed by Ron and Hermione.

Ron grinned as they let the staircase carry them upwards. "I love this thing."

"That's only because you're a lazy bugger who prefers not to walk," countered Ginny.

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"I'm not lazy," Ron protested.

"Tell that to anyone who's seen you 'study'," noted Hermione.

"Hermione!"

Harry smiled at their light banter and, noticing that they had reached the top of the stairs, knocked against the oak door before them. The sounds of someone walking towards the door could only just be heard before the door was swung open by Dumbledore, who was wearing a violet cloak over periwinkle coloured robes.

"Ah, Harry. I've been expecting you and your friends," he greeted, stepping to one side and motioning for them to enter. "Please, come in."

"Thank you, sir."

The four walked into the office, settling into the four plush leather chairs which were arranged in front of Dumbledore's massive desk. Harry, since it was acknowledged that this meeting would in all likelihood concern him, sat closest to the desk with the other three sitting slightly behind him on either side.

Closing the outer door to his office Dumbledore passed around them and settled down behind his desk. He pushed his spectacles up so they were resting comfortably on the bridge of his nose and then rummaged around inside one of his draws for a few seconds, searching for something.

"Would anyone care for a jelly baby?" he offered, withdrawing a small paper bag from the drawer and extending it over the desktop so that they could reach. "I'm rather partial to the red ones myself."

"Jelly *babies*?" asked Ron incredulously, looking at the packet with revulsion.

"They're a Muggle sweet, Ron, not real babies," Hermione explained, as it was obvious that her boyfriend thought the jelly babies were made from real infants. She declined Dumbledore's offer by saying, "No thank you, Professor."

Harry also shook his head. "No thanks, Albus."

"Thanks, but no," Ginny demurred.

"Er..."

"Just take some, Ron," Hermione told him, shaking her head in obviously despair of Ron ever understanding Muggle culture, despite Arthur Weasley's fanatic fascination with them.

Ron reached into the proffered bag of jelly babies and pulled out a green one, which he regarded suspiciously for several seconds before popping it into his mouth. Remembering his manners at the last second he added, "Uh, thank you, sir."

Dumbledore smiled graciously and put the packet back into the drawer, but not before searching through it and finding a red baby for himself to chew on. Sliding the drawer closed he sank back into his chair and steepled his fingers just below his chin as he regarded the four teenagers sitting patiently (and impatiently) in front of him. "Now, on to business," he began, his bright eyes sliding from one student to the other from over the rim of his glasses. "I believe you are all curious as to why I've asked you here."

Ginny, Ron and Hermione, sitting slightly behind Harry, said nothing - clearly willing to let him speak for them all. Resisting the urge to lick his lips in anticipation, Harry settled for nodding silently in affirmation.

"Towards the end of your first year at Hogwarts, Harry, you asked me why it is that Lord Voldemort wanted to kill you," Dumbledore said gravely. He paused, seemingly to collect his thoughts, and then nodded to himself. "It is now past the time, I think, that I should have told you."

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"Should I brace myself?" Harry asked, trying to ignore the sudden knot that had formed in his stomach at Dumbledore's declaration. He had been waiting for the answer to this question ever since he had learned the truth about his parents' fate. In a way this was something he had been searching for all his life - since he had never truly believed the fantasy the Dursleys had told him when he was younger.

"After everything you have experienced, Harry, I have no doubt that what I have to say will not overly perturb you," replied Dumbledore, giving the question serious consideration before he answered. The corners of his mouth turned down a fraction as he continued, "Unfortunately, I cannot say the same of the second reason for which I have asked you here tonight."

Ginny immediately latched onto this and leaned forward to ask, "Second reason?"

Dumbledore nodded. "Yes, but that can wait until afterwards."

"All right then," Harry said, taking in a deep breath and letting it out as a protracted sigh as he sank back into his chair. Unconsciously he stretched out with his left hand, reaching for Ginny who slipped her hand into his and gave a comforting squeeze. This time Harry surrendered to the urge to lick his lips, his mouth suddenly very dry, and asked, "Why *did* Voldemort want to kill me when I was a baby?"

"The story begins shortly after you were born, Harry, at the height of Voldemort's reign," began Dumbledore with a sigh that matched Harry's earlier. He looked over them all and asked, "You are, I'm sure, familiar with the Hog's Head?"

Harry nodded. "It's a pub in Hogsmeade. I've heard Hagrid mention it a few times and I've passed by it once or twice. I've never gone inside though - doesn't look to appealing."

"It looks positively filthy," added Hermione, her distaste clearly evident in her voice and her expression. "I'm amazed the health authorities haven't condemned the place."

"It has seen better days," Dumbledore agreed.

"What happened in the Hog's Head, sir?" asked Ginny.

"I was conducting interviews for a teaching position at Hogwarts that had recently become vacant at the time," replied Dumbledore. "Divination."

"Professor Trelawney," Harry immediately said, eyes narrowing slightly as he considered. The possible meaning fairly jumped out at him. "You told me once, in my third year, that she's only ever made two genuine predictions."

Dumbledore nodded. "Quite right, Harry. As you have gathered, it was during my interview with her that she made her first true prediction - a prophecy."

"That old bat Trelawney actually made a real prediction?" Ron blurted out, his eyes wide with disbelief. Hermione, sitting in the chair next to him, glared at him in mild outrage. She clearly disapproved of his saying anything disparaging about one of the staff, even though she herself was convinced that the Divination professor was a fraud. Ron, immediately realizing his mistake, flushed a bright red and ducked his head low. "Oh, er, sorry, Professor. I, ah..."

"No need to apologise, Ronald. I can understand your scepticism," replied Dumbledore, waving Ron's apology aside. A thin smile graced his lips. "Yes, Sybil did indeed have a vision."

"Somehow I won't be surprised to learn that it involves my untimely demise," Harry commented, his voice dry enough to turn an ocean into a desert.

"Harry!" exclaimed Hermione.

"But he's right!" Ron defended his best friend. "That old ba-- ah, she's always predicting Harry's death."

Dumbledore smiled fully this time, obviously amused by their byplay. He shook his head a fraction and continued his explanation, "Fortunately, the prophecy was of a far different nature."

Ginny, who was still holding Harry's hand, asked, "What exactly did she say, Professor?"

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"I think it best you hear for yourselves," replied Dumbledore, rising from his chair and striding over to the cabinet where he store some of his more uncommon possessions. Swinging the cabinet door open he reached for a shallow stone basin that Harry recognised a pensive - the one he had accidentally fallen into towards the end of his fourth year, before the third task.

Removing the pensive from the cabinet, Dumbledore carefully carried it back to where they were sitting in wait. He set the basin, filled with shimmering memories, in the centre of the desk before retaking his seat on the other side. Taking hold of his wand, the headmaster dipped the tip into the

pensieve and stirred around for several minutes, apparently searching for the memory that he wished to show them all. Finally he nodded and, tapping his wand against the bowl's side, settled back to watch.

"The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches..." announced a familiar voice that was strangely distorted somehow. At first Harry thought it was a side effect of the pensieve, but then remembered his own experience with Trelawney's second genuine prophecy, back in his third year. The Divination professor had used a similar tone of voice whilst in her trance then, predicting Voldemort's second rise to power.

Mentally shrugging himself back into the present, Harry focused on the pensieve and what was being said. He could see that an image of Trelawney had swirled up through the liquid memories and risen to form a ghostly figurine on the pensieve's surface. The tiny character continued to speak.

"Born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies... and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not... and either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives... the one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the seven month dies..."

The prophesy obviously ended there as the ghostly figure sank back into the depths of Dumbledore's pensieve, the last words echoing faintly throughout the office before fading away. Harry leaned back in his chair, releasing his hold on Ginny's hand so that he could reach up and run a finger along his jawline. His only comment on what he and his friends had just witnessed was a single word, muttered thoughtfully as he stroked his chin.

"Interesting."

"And that's why Tom wanted to kill Harry?" asked Ginny quietly, as if a hush had fallen over the headmaster's office and she dared not risk breaking it.

"Sadly, yes," admitted Dumbledore equally as quiet. "I erred in holding the interview at the Hog's Head, where unfortunately someone allied to Lord Voldemort was able to overhear Sybil's prophecy and inform him of it."

"So he tried to kill me," concluded Harry thoughtfully, unconsciously reaching up to brush the palm of one hand against his scar, "but instead marked me as an equal."

"Yes."

Ginny looked over at Harry and said, "This actually explains quite a bit."

"Mm-hmm," he agreed wordlessly. "Particularly my Animagus form."

"What d'you mean?" asked Hermione, looking from Harry to Ginny in puzzlement. "What's this have to do with you Animagus form?"

"Remember what it said?" Harry reminded her, "He will have power the Dark Lord knows not."

Ron shook his head in confusion. "But you hadn't been chosen by the Order then."

Rolling her, as if it were obvious, Ginny said, "That's not the power it was talking about, Ron. Harry's always been more than an ordinary wizard, you should know that."

"Haven't you ever wondered why my Animagus form is a creature that's not only mythical, but also magical?" asked Harry, rising from his seat and beginning to pace around Dumbledore's office. "Not one Animagus in a thousand, a hundred thousand even, can change into a magical form."

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"That's why I can only change into a horse. If it was the Order's power which determined our Animagus forms then I'd be a unicorn or a aethonian," added Ginny, watching as Harry passed from Fawkes' empty stand to the cabinet that had housed the pensieve.

Dumbledore, stroking his moustache, nodded in understanding. "Your own power, the power the prophecy speaks of, is what enables you to change into an Imperial Arch Griffin."

"From the look of things," agreed Harry. He chuckled under his breath and admitted, "In fact, if it weren't for the Order moderating the transformation, chances are I wouldn't have even be able to become an Animagus."

"That makes sense," said Hermione thoughtfully. "All people have one distinctive form that represents them to some degree or another - that's what they change into if they become Animagi. But if Harry's natural form is such a powerful one, he wouldn't be able to make or control the change without outside help."

Holding up a hand to signal for silent, Dumbledore announced, "Regretfully I must call this charming treatise of Animagi attributes to an end for the time being as there are more pressing matters for us to discuss."

Harry, returning to his chair, said, "That would be the second reason you wanted to speak to me."

"Yes."

"Should I brace myself?" he asked again.

Dumbledore nodded. "That might be a good idea."

"That's not very reassuring," observed Ginny, shifting her chair over so that it was closer to Harry's.

"At the start of last summer, Bill Weasley came to Hogwarts in search of assistance," Dumbledore began to speak, opening one of the many drawers in his desk and looking through its contents.

Ron sat up and asked in surprise, "Bill was here? For help?"

"Yes. One of the many expeditions mounted by Gringotts' Egyptian division had unearthed an ancient stone tablet that they were unable to translate," explained Dumbledore, still searching through the drawer. He nodded at the glass-topped wooden case that had been resting inconspicuously on one side of his desk. "After Bill brought it to my attention I passed it on to Miss Delacour, who had only just joined the staff as our Professor of Ancient Runes."

"What does this have to do with me?" asked Harry.

"Shortly before Halloween, Fleur came to me with a preliminary translation," answered Dumbledore, finding what he had been looking for. He withdrew a scroll from the drawer and set it in front of him on his desk. "I did not wish to burden you unduly, Harry, as you were at the time concerned with the dilemma posed by the Well of Shadows. Now that the situation surrounding Draco has been resolved, I feel you should be informed of what exactly the Fleur and Bill were able to uncover."

"This is Miss Delacour's final translation, as well as the original tablet which Bill left in our care," he continued gravely. "This too, it would appear, is a prophecy. One that concerns Harry."

Harry sat forward in his chair, looking at the tablet in its glass-topped case. "Looks like some form of Sanskrit," he observed with preternatural calm. "Sumerian?"

Dumbledore actually blinked. "I didn't know that the two of you could read Sumerian," he finally said. Frown lines puckered his brow before he more or less grumbled, "I wish that I had known sooner, so that I might have spared Fleur the trouble of working her way through such a tedious translation."

"I can't speak or read a word of the language," admitted Ginny with a rueful sideways look at Harry. She pointed a thumb at him and explained, "He's the one with the 'gift' for ancient and long dead languages."

"Yes, I read and speak Sumerian every day," Harry countered sarcastically.

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Rolling her eyes and looking back at Dumbledore, Ginny saw his confusion and elaborated, "When the Order of the Phoenix bonded with Harry it didn't just give him access to its power - it transferred its knowledge to him on what could be called an instinctual level."

Harry nodded in confirmation. "That's the reason why I could suddenly cast spells that would normally take years of study and practice to get right."

"Whereas I still have to spend time learning them - except for the simplest and most basic ones."

"Ah, I had wondered," Dumbledore admitted. He motioned for Harry to take a closer look at the stone tablet and asked, "So, what do you think?"

Harry looked over the tablet, reading the Sanskrit without any referring to Fleur's painstaking compiled translation. His face might as well have been carved from the same stone as the tablet while he interpreted what was displayed before arching his eyebrows and declaring blandly, "Very bad poetry."

"You seem awfully calm about this, Harry," Dumbledore remarked, seemingly concerned by this fact.

"I refuse to believe that the future is predetermined. My fate is my own, it's not governed by anything except the decisions I have made or will make," Harry declared staunchly.

"What's it say?" asked Hermione.

Clearing his throat, more for theatrics than anything else, Harry leaned forward in his chair and began to read the contents of the tablet's ancient scripts out for everyone present to hear.

*"Four great mages shall found a school for those that wish to learn
the art of their magical gift, which most shall not chance to earn
Dissension shall split their ranks and their paths shall part ways
A thousand years will pass, with many tales for the bards to sing
until the serpent's final dark son shall rise and disaster bring
His black reign shall be one of terror; unmatched and unchallenged
Then a child of thunder and phoenix shall drive the dark lord away
marked by his lightning he shall with those that abhor him stay
Alone in bleak despair the child will retain his heart and courage
Then to his true home shall he travel to fight the darkness again
his peace will be shattered by a treacherous competition and pain
Darkness shall be reborn by the theft of bone, blood and flesh
The dark lord will return seeking his vengeance at any length
but a phoenix shall gift the child with knowledge and strength
Battle upon battle shall the keepers of darkness and light fight"*

Harry paused and glanced sidelong at Ron and Hermione, then at Ginny. His lips tugged upwards into a humourless smile as he commented, "Nothing particularly new up till now, but here is where things become... interesting."

"What d'you mean?" asked Ron, sitting on the edge of his seat and holding the armrests in a whiteknuckled grip.

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Hermione, by his side, seemed equally engrossed by the words Harry was speaking, but gnawed on the fingernails of her left hand rather than bounce about in her seat. Only Ginny seemed to be taking everything in with an outer calmness that matched anything Harry or Dumbledore could produce. It was only in her eyes, which had grown fractionally wider as Harry spoke, that anyone would be able to see her mounting unease, and even then only if they familiar with her expressions.

"Let me finish reading it for you," Harry replied, turning back to the tablet.

*"Neither shall be victorious as the balance cannot truly be swayed
until the thunder child and his allies from within are betrayed
Death will claim the phoenix lord before his final studies can end
Only by turning from the light to the dark can he endure in mind
hiding in the wake of death shall be his path to return to his kind
The final battle between them will destroy all that was built before
Survival shall come to who surrenders completely to the dark days
therein lies the only path to salvation from the source of always"*

Harry paused once again, this time to smirk in quiet amusement before finishing.

"Continued on next slab..."

"Continued on the next slab?" exclaimed Ron, almost jumping out of his seat. He looked incredulously at Harry and demanded, "You've got to be joking - it can't say that! Where's the next slab, then?"

"There doesn't seem to be one," admitted Harry.

Dumbledore cleared his throat softly, capturing everyone's attention. He sighed deeply and sank deeper into his chair, seeming in danger of disappearing into the leather upholstery. "That, I'm afraid, is all that Gringotts uncovered - the rest is lost to us. As you have no doubt been able to determine for yourselves, this is a prophecy describing the establishment of Hogwarts, the rift between Slytherin and the other founders, the first rise of Lord Voldemort, his defeat by Harry and then his subsequent resurrection thirteen years later."

Hermione, looking very pale, swallowed and spoke up, "That's not all it describes."

"Unfortunately," Dumbledore readily agreed. "It also states that Harry is going to be killed sometime during his seventh year at Hogwarts. And shall only be able to avoid this fate if he turns to dark magic, or something of the sort."

"Harry's going to die?" asked Ginny, plaintively.

"And what else is new?" asked Harry wryly.

Ginny looked at him, her eyes sparkling brightly. "Harry..."

"Don't worry, Gin," he confidently assured her. "Nothing's set in stone. Not even prophecies from on high."

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27. All Fool's Day

"Third principal application of aconite?"

"Wolfsbane potion."

"What must be added to triffid oil in order to make it soluble?"

"Iodine."

"How long must the Axolotl Potion be left to simmer?"

"Two days and nights."

"When are you going to put on some knickers?"

"What?!?!?"

"Gotcha."

"Harry!" exclaimed Ginny in disbelief and more than a little disapproval, Hermione and Ron right alongside her, as Harry grinned wolfishly back at her.

It had been a month since the attack on Hogwarts by the Well of Shadows and Voldemort, heralding the coming of spring and (much to the fifth-years' dismay) the coming of the much dreaded and much maligned Ordinary Wizarding Levels. This was the reason why, despite Harry's injection of quirky (not to mention suggestive) humour, that the three older Gryffindor students were giving Ginny a quick test on potions - which was scheduled to be the first of this year's O.W.L.s.

Harry laughed as a fine blush rose to his girlfriend's face, tinting her cheeks the same red as her hair.

He was hard pressed to decide who looked more scandalised by his question, Hermione or Ron.

Hermione, no doubt, was appalled by Harry's apparent lack of concern in aiding Ginny study for her upcoming exams. Ron, without *any* doubt, was looking as wide-eyed as he was because he really did not want to hear Harry and Ginny discussing such matters in front of him.

"Come on, Gin," Harry told her, and by proxy his two best friends, "you know your Potions almost backwards and forwards. You can surely give it a rest until after breakfast, can't you?"

"Are you forgetting, Harry, exactly what I did to Snape last year?" retorted Ginny, looking a

combination of frustrated and embarrassed at having to bring the subject up.

Harry shrugged. "So you may have bashed the smarmy git into the wall a bit..."

Hermione winced and added, "Unnecessarily."

"And he's been holding it against me ever since then," Ginny groaned. "This entire year's been one hellish Potions class after another - it's a miracle my grades have been as good as they are."

Miracles have nothing to do with it, my dear.

The credit for your passable results lies solely upon the Order and our masterful tutelage of the subject of potion brewing.

Precisely.

As a matter of fact...

Ginny groaned again, "Oh no, they're awake."

Ron looked at his sister as if she had just said something strange, which Harry supposed she had if you could not 'hear' the voices of the Order, and asked, "Who's awake?"

"Guess."

"Er..."

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"She means the Order, Ron," explained Harry.

"Oh." Ron nodded in understanding. He considered that piece of information for a second before frowning in confusion and asking, "D'you mean they actually go to sleep like normal people?"

Harry blinked in surprise and said, "You know, I'd never really considered it."

~Of course they can't sleep~ declared Ginny silently, stepping up to Harry so that she could entwine her arm with his and resume their journey to the Great Hall. ~After all, they're all dead - have been for centuries. They don't have any bodies that need sleep.~

Or to smack if they irritate us, he ruefully agreed.

Not all of us, I hope, protested Merlin lightly. **I will admit that some of the more immature members of the Order do have a tendency to rub people the wrong way...**

It's mostly that mead-guzzling oaf Loki that's at fault, accused Osiris.

Loki immediately leapt to his own defence. **Me? You cause almost as much trouble as I do, you brainless Egyptian!**

Harry could almost see Osiris rising up in outrage. If he had been in the Grand Hall of the Phoenix, that is precisely what he would have seen. Though none of the past members of the Order had anything approaching a corporeal body in the real world, they did possess the ability to seem rather solid whilst in the metaphysical realm that contained their memories within the Order's precincts.

Brainless? Are you daft, man? Osiris practically bellowed, his accent growing thicker as he spoke.

My people built the temples, the obelisks, the Sphinx, the pyramids!

The argument --which looked to become quite heated once the rest of the Order got involved-- faded into the background as both Harry and Ginny turned their minds outward and back to their walk though Hogwarts, where a peculiar noise had slowly caught their attention. It sounded, at least to Harry's ears, rather like a cross between a female hippopotamus in labour and Dudley complaining about not having enough to eat, only not in English.

Ron was the first to comment on it. "Listen... d'you hear that?"

"Yeah," confirmed Ginny, cocking her head to one side and focusing on the noise in an attempt to identify the source. Her eyebrows, at first drawn together in concentration, rose up almost to her hairline in amazement. When she finally spoke, it was more a question than anything else, checking to see if the others were hearing the same. "It sounds like... Crabbe and Goyle?"

"Singing the *Barber of Seville*?" asked Hermione, looking both aghast and amused.

Harry listened intently for a moment, verifying Ginny and Hermione's conclusions. It did indeed sound very much like Malfoy's former bodyguards engaged in a hearty rendition of Rossini's opera. Either that or they were being tortured under the Cruciatus Curse. Regardless of the cause, the sound was not pleasant to listen to, even at such a distance away from the singers as the four Gryffindors currently were. It did not take long for Harry to suggest an appropriate plan of action.

"Let's go this way instead."

"Good idea," agreed Ginny, already turning down the side corridor Harry had indicated.

"Best one I've heard this morning," concurred Hermione.

As they had already been a short distance from the Great Hall before beginning their detour, the quartet arrived for breakfast only a minute or so later than they would have. Making their way to the Gryffindor table, Harry was suspicious to note that everyone was having breakfast - seemingly in a calm, collected manner and without half the ruckus he had been expecting this morning. The only odd thing he could see was that all four tables seemed to have a greater than normal amount of tomatoes arrayed on side dishes with the rest of the food.

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Taking his seat, Ginny on his right and Hermione on his left, he reached for a platter of sausages and began serving himself breakfast. As he speared a couple of the sausages with his fork, transferring them to his plate, Harry remembered something and silently checked with Ginny. *Hey Gin? Today's the first of April, isn't it? April Fools?*

~Oh Circe's liver~ was Ginny's response as she paused in gathering her own meal and turned to look at him with wide eyes. *~Is that today? Already?~*

I'll take that as a yes?

~Yes, though heaven only knows how it slipped my mind~ she answered. Suddenly she froze in place and started looking about her in a suspicious manner. *You don't think they're going to go through with it, do you?*

They're your brothers, he replied. *You should know them better than I do.*

Ginny continued to look around the hall. *~Perhaps, but it's you that's their business partner. Shouldn't you be in the loop when it comes to the... how did they put it in their letter? The grand opening?~*

Harry shrugged, *I suppose. All I really know is they'll be opening the store **shop they've arranged in Diagon Alley at noon today.*

~Maybe we'll be spared then~ Ginny silently hoped. *~Not even Fred and George could set off a prank at Hogwarts when they're in London.~*

"We should be thankful for small mercies," he told her.

"I can't stand it when you do that," interjected Ron, while spreading a thick layer of grape jam on his toast. When both Harry and Ginny looked at him he elaborated. "Hold conversations in your heads like that and only speaking the odd sentence out loud. It's spooky."

Coming from someone who lives in a castle filled with ghosts, that's not saying very much.

Harry shrugged and turned back to the fried tomatoes he was helping himself to. Oddly enough he could have sworn that the fresh tomatoes, sitting in a bowl a short distance down the table, let loose soft and furious hisses as he did so.

I zink, 'Arry, zat maybe you should avoid ze tomatoes, advised Joan.

Ginny, having also turned back to her breakfast, looked up at the sound of wings beating and announced, "Owl post's right on time."

Glancing up Harry could see that she was correct and that close to a hundred owls had streamed into the Great Hall and were circling about. Looking them over Harry quickly determined that Hedwig, his faithful snowy owl, was not amongst them and so turned back to gathering his breakfast.

He was only peripherally aware of one barn owl dropping Hermione's *Daily Prophet*, to which she still had a subscription for some reason or other, in her lap. He could hear her unfolding the newspaper as

he helped himself to some scrambled eggs. He had just started searching for a salt shaker when Hermione's sharp intake of breath reached his ears.

"Harry," Hermione called his name. "I think you'd better read this."

Harry looked at her, noting the peculiar expression on her face. Arching an eyebrow he reached over and took the sheaf of paper she was holding out for him. Glancing curiously at her and receiving only a silent urging to start reading, he pushed his plate out of the way and unfolded the newspaper to the front page.

MINISTER OF MAGIC INVOLVED IN BLOODY COVER-UP!

By Rita Skeeter.

Suffice to say, the headline caught Harry's attention and held it. He looked up from the paper and at Hermione, whose expression was now one of mixed satisfaction and apprehension.

"Rita Skeeter," Harry breathed.

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"I'd almost forgotten that we'd set her on the Minister during Halloween," mused Ginny, leaning over to Harry's shoulder so that she could read the article at the same time.

Harry resumed reading.

In a special report this morning freelance reporter Rita Skeeter, who has been on extended leave since the events following the Triwizard Tournament and You-Know-Who's return, has uncovered topsecret documentation revealing that current Minister of Magic, Cornelius Fudge, has been instrumental in a massive cover-up involving the deaths of over one hundred witches and wizards last August. Sources in the Ministry reveal that Fudge, who has thus far declined to make an official statement, repressed a Department of Mysteries report detailing the discovery of evidence indicating the completion of a highly organised ceremony in early August last year. The ceremony's victims, ranging from ten to sixty-six years of age, were used as sacrifices in the ritual used to create a Well of Shadows.

Information released shortly after the start of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry's new school year, reveals that Draco Malfoy, son of convicted felon and Death Eater Lucius Malfoy, was the recipient of the Well of Shadows. As reported by this newspaper in our edition on the fifth of September, Draco Malfoy, who was supposed to be starting his sixth year of study at Hogwarts, revealed his new status on the first day of term in a terrifying display that cumulated in the deaths of six Hogwarts students and numerous injuries.

Under-Secretary to the Minister, Dolores Umbridge, refused to comment on accusations that many of Minister Fudge's personal staff aided him the suppression of the report. However, inquiries made by the Internal Affairs Branch have revealed the possible existence of a conspiracy in the Ministry's upper echelons with the apparent goal of keeping knowledge hidden from the public eye.

Further examination of confiscated Ministry reports and memorandums suggest that it was the intention of those accused to prevent Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived, and Albus Dumbledore, headmaster of Hogwarts, from learning of the successful completion of a Well of Shadows summoning ceremony. Reasons for this action have not been provided, but at this time it appears to stem from a well-documented personal grudge between the Minister and young Mister Potter.

"This is incredible," Harry finally said, setting the paper down.

"I know," agreed Hermione. "I never imagined..."

Ginny laughed softly and shook her head in disbelief. "She did it. She actually did it."

Ron, who had appropriated his own copy of the *Daily Prophet* to read, tossed the newspaper back to the impatient looking second-year Ravenclaw he had taken it from. He shook his head, much like his sister, and muttered, "This is incredible."

****If I'm not mistaken, you already said that, Harry.****

"Oh, shut up. This is important."

"Hey!" protested Ron, looking hurt by Harry's exclamation.

Harry shook his head and apologised. "Not you, Ron. I was talking to Iphicles."

****Sorry...****

"So..." Ginny propped herself against the table with her elbows. "It looks like we'll have a new Minister of Magic before too long. Possibly an entirely new administration in the Ministry as well."

"I hope Dad doesn't get caught up in this," worried Ron, gnawing at his bottom lip as he considered the possibility.

Any further concern about the forthcoming trouble in the Ministry did not so much come to an abrupt end as it died a painful death when the Great Hall --particularly in the vicinity of the Slytherin table-- erupted with shouts, odd squelching noises and a series of loud bangs that preceded the launch of a dazzling display of fireworks into the air.

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Shop Ninety-Seven

Diagon Alley

The blazing lights had flashed and flared in every colour imaginable as they coalesced into the sparkling sign that advertised the much-anticipated grand opening of Fred and George's joke, prank and novelty item shop - specially timed to take place on the one day of the year when such items were always in their greatest demand.

"Mother of..." breathed Ginny in awe, watching as the crackling sign burst into a sparkling array of fiery dragons and griffins before slowly fading away. "They did it. Those crazy bastards actually

managed to pull it off."

So impressive, not to mention unexpected, was this display, that it took nearly a full minute before anyone realized that the Slytherins were continuing to shout and scream and holler and otherwise make something of a racket. It took even longer for the other occupants of the Great Hall to realize that the Slytherins were not actually complaining or protesting, but rather trying to deal with what at first looked like an especially bloody attack on everyone in their house. It was only when Harry recognised just what it was that was assaulting the Slytherins that he realized the blood --as he had first mistaken it for-- was something else all together.

Tomatoes.

Their soft skins were split into what looked like eyes, nostrils and fang-filled mouths, giving them an appearance rather similar to a Halloween jack-o-lantern, only red rather than orange. Armed with only these caricatured features, and a rather suspect method of locomotion, the tomatoes were rolling and hopping up and down the length of the house table and launching themselves at the wide-eyed and seemingly panic-stricken Slytherins.

I told you to avoid ze tomatoes, said Joan smugly.

Harry watched as Pansy Parkinson and Millicent Bulstrode ran screaming from the Great Hall, a dozen or so fresh tomatoes rolling and bouncing after both of them. He could only shake his head and resume eating his eggs. "Sometimes it's better not to ask."

"Y'know, I used to delude myself into believing that this place would calm down after Fred and George had left," mused Ron, still watching as the tomatoes continued to attack any Slytherins they could find.

"Not likely," Hermione told him, "they merely raised the bar to new heights."

Ron looked away from the carnage, as it was, and looked at her in puzzlement. "I don't remember them ever doing anything to the Three Broomsticks."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Never mind."

Harry, however, was still preoccupied by the article in the *Prophet*. He looked at the newspaper, which he had situated next to his plate, and skimmed over it once again. He noticed that Fudge, or the front page picture of him at least, seemed to be gnashing his teeth in frustration as reporters kept on silently badgering him with questions and camera flashes.

~*Worried?*~ asked Ginny, reaching out to turn the newspaper so that she would not have to crane her neck as much to look at it.

Shouldn't I be? he replied. *Fudge may be an incompetent buffoon that couldn't find his own arse if you handed it to him, but he can still cause damage, as this proves.*

Not for much longer from the look of things, observed Isis.

Romulus agreed, **If there is an inquiry as the article claims there might...**

Harry shook his head. "He'll fight it."

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"Even a vote of no confidence?" asked Hermione, apparently understanding his meaning, even if she had not heard the entirety of the conversation up until them.

"I don't doubt that he will be removed from office," Harry told her grimly, "but what frightens me is how much trouble he'll stir up trying to avoid the inevitable."

That's one of the risks you have to take, Merlin told him.

Especially when you set an unscrupulous, not to mention possibly rabid, reporter on the trail of a story that you knew could lead to this situation.

Toppling governments is a tricky business, Harry.

Are you saying you have experience in matters like this?

Absolutely none.

And I've got even less.

Same here.

Me too.

Sorry, can't help yeh.

Ginny frowned. *~I do not find that reassuring.~*

The remainder of April Fool's Day proceeded in much the same manner as breakfast. Various classrooms, corridors and chambers would unexpectedly explode into Technicolor firework displays proclaiming the opening of Fred and George's joke shop. Naturally each advertisement was closely followed by an audacious prank which supposedly demonstrated the twin's wares. Ginny and Ron, knowing their brothers as they did, said that this was simply an added bonus as far as they were concerned.

As a result of Fred and George's marketing campaign not many lessons were able to proceed as planned. The students were either delighted or furious - depending on whether or not they fell prey to any of the assorted pranks. The professors appeared to become resigned to the fact that nothing much could be taught, and one or two simply sat back to wait and enjoy the next spectacle of the day.

By the time lunch came around everyone was beginning to get into the spirit of the thing and almost nobody was spared a prank or more at their expense - particularly Professor Snape for some reason, though the Gryffindors denied any involvement. Only the fifth and seventh-years were unappreciative of the day's laidback approach and lack of productivity. This was primarily because they were more concerned with studying for their O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s than they were with having a laugh.

By dinner, however, even they had surrendered to the inevitable and joined in sitting at their house tables in anticipation of the final climactic encounter of the day. Little did they know the extent and

importance of what they were about to witness, even though its consequences would prove more far-reaching than any of them could possibly believe.

Harry, Ginny, Ron and Hermione were sitting at the Gryffindor table --granting the tomatoes a judicious amount of distance-- when Harry spotted Cho Chang making her way towards them from the Ravenclaw table across the hall. She was looking up and down the length of the Gryffindor table, a faint frown on her brow, seemingly searching for someone.

"Hello, Harry," she greeted as she reached them.

"Hi, Cho," replied Harry, looking up from his dinner. "What brings you over here? Looking for Neville?"

"As a matter of fact, yes," Cho confirmed. She looked up and down the table yet again before asking, "Where is he?"

Ron, not pausing from eating, answered, "In the Hospital Wing."

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Cho, quite understandably, looked at him in alarm. Neville, as everyone at Hogwarts knew, was accident-prone to a startling degree. "What?"

"He had a slight accident in Care of Magical Creatures," explained Harry, trying to sound calm about it, but not able to repress a faint smile as he remembered the incident.

Ron elaborated around a mouthful of steak, "He ran into a tree and broke his nose."

Cho looked from Ron to Harry in disbelief. She blinked several times, clearly trying to process what she had been told, and asked, "What on earth does Hagrid have you studying that could make Neville *run* into a tree?"

Harry smiled impishly and asked in return, "I don't suppose you've ever heard of the Ravenous Bugblatter Beast of Traal?"

"A mind-bogglingly stupid animal," explained Hermione when Cho shook her head, "that assumes if you can't see it, then it can't see you."

"Daft as a brush," added Ron, helping himself to more potatoes, "but very very ravenous."

"Oh no, I think I can see where this is heading..." groaned Cho.

Harry chuckled and explained not only for Cho but also for Ginny, who had been in Charms at the time, "Neville volunteered to demonstrate how to avoid looking at it by wrapping a towel around his head."

Hermione sighed and tried valiantly not to smile as she continued. "Unfortunately Fang decided to join us around about that time."

Cho looked puzzled and asked, "Fang?"

"Hagrid's dog," Ginny clarified.

"The one with only one head, thank goodness," noted Ron, serving only to confuse Cho more and cause her to look at him strangely. Despite the fact that Harry's first-year adventure involving the Philosopher's Stone was common knowledge, not everybody knew the particulars. Even those who knew about Fluffy, and his role in guarding the third-floor corridor, minor details such as Hagrid's name for the beast.

Hermione waved Ron back to his meal. "Anyways, Neville got into a bit of a panic when Fang ran up to him --he thought it was the Ravenous Bugblatter Beast-- and, well, one thing led to another."

Cho lowered her head in resignation. "Oh dear."

"Don't worry," Harry told her, reaching up to pat her shoulder. "Madam Pomfrey will be done with him before dinner's over."

The unexpected swinging open of the doors leading from the Entrance Hall into the Great Hall --Harry was still unable to work out why they always seemed to be closed, in spite of the traffic through them all the time-- caused the noise level at all four house tables, as well as the staff table, to drop to next to nothing as people noticed the new arrival.

Harry, who had at first just glanced in that direction, could not prevent his eyebrows from nearly shooting off his head as Cornelius Fudge stomped angrily into the room. The Minister's lime green bowler hat seemed in imminent danger of toppling off his head as he marched furiously down the row between the Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw tables.

"He has more balls than a Quidditch team," commented Cho, looking at the man with an expression of obvious distaste, "coming in here after this morning's *Prophet*."

"Don't worry," Hermione assured the Ravenclaw witch, her voice clipped and carrying a dangerous undertone. The normally reserved young witch was glaring at Fudge in a manner that slightly worried Harry. "Once I'm through with that egotistical prat, he'll be a eunuch."

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Ron, seemingly also picking up on his girlfriend's dangerous disposition, placed a hand on her shoulder in an attempt to calm her down. "Hermione..."

Unfortunately, before Ron could do more, Fudge strode right up in front of the four Gryffindors - almost knocking Cho aside in his haste. His face was a curious mixture of pale and blotched red as he began to speak, in an imperious tone, "Harry Potter--"

Hermione, actually baring her teeth, interrupted him with a snarl. "What the bloody blue blazes are you doing here?"

Fudge blinked in surprise and stammered for a few seconds, apparently finding himself at something of a loss. Gathering himself, by attempting to stand straight, he glared at Hermione and audibly ground his teeth as he grated, "I will not be spoken to in such a manner!"

"I'll speak to you however I like, you great moronic oaf!" countered Hermione, rising from her place at the Gryffindor house table and turning to confront the Minister head on.

"I won't stand for this!" bellowed Fudge, his face flushing almost purple.

"Oh? Would you rather we get on our knees and sing your praises?" asked Harry, also rising to his feet and turning to face Fudge. He looked down at the Minister, he was nearly half a foot taller than the other man, and noted bitingly, "You seem to have forgotten the exact nature of your position, Fudge. *You* are the Minister of Magic. It's *your* job to serve and protect the people who elected *you* as their supposed leader. Not the other way around."

"Don't think that you have any influence whatsoever over me any more," Fudge hissed angrily, pointing an accusing finger at Harry. He backed away a step, a look of satisfaction on his podgy features as he said, "I had the last vial of that *Set's Bride* which you supposedly gave me last Christmas analysed by the best Potion Masters in Britain... *it was water!!*"

"Of course it was," snapped Hermione. She was looking at Fudge as though he were possibly the stupidest creature she had ever seen - which Harry supposed was probably true. "He wouldn't be much of a hero for the light if he went around poisoning people just to get his way. Unlike you, Harry isn't a pathetic--"

Ron, who was now also standing, put took Hermione by both shoulders and turned her away from the flustered Minister before she could tear into him any more. Harry shared a worried glance with him as he pulled her back a step or two, leaving only Harry and Ginny standing immediately in front of Fudge. Neither of the two young wizards could really believe that Hermione had reacted in such a manner - it was certainly out of character for someone who was normally exceptionally respectful of any authority figure.

Even the various members of the Order seemed impressed by her outspoken criticism. Osiris was the first to comment on it, sounding particularly delighted. **I never thought I'd live to see the day that the know-it-all ripped into the Minister of Magic like that.**

You're dead, remember? Alexander reminded him. **You didn't live to see the day.**

Details, details.

Ginny, who was standing by Harry's side, took her turn to speak to the Minister. "In any case, it doesn't matter. Harry got you to admit that Tom has returned. Having accomplished that - you're no longer of any use to us."

"Tom? Tom?" repeated Fudge, looking completely lost. "Who the bloody Hades is *Tom*?"

"Tom Marvolo Riddle," Ginny answered calmly and with just a hint of disapproval in her voice, as though Fudge had somehow missed the blindingly obvious. "The most dangerous dark lord to have risen this century."

"You're that simpleton Weasley's child, aren't you?" Fudge asked, looking at her properly for the first time. His mouth curled into an unfavourably sneer as he said, "I shouldn't be surprised that you're spouting such nonsense."

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Vaporise this imbecile, urged Iolaus. **Better yet, hex him all the way back to his office in London.**

Tempting, but inappropriate, replied Harry.

~I might just do it anyway, Harry~ Ginny growled silently, her bubbling anger making itself felt though their connection. *~You heard what he said about my dad.~*

"Hardly, Cornelius," observed a calm but authoritative voice which drew everyone's attention to one side. Standing not far from where they were having their confrontation, was Professor Dumbledore. His had apparently come down from the staff table, unobserved, and had only now decided to make his presence known to them. "Indeed, Virginia has been perfectly correct in her statement." Seeing the blank look in Fudge's eyes, Harry began to trace lines in the air with his index finger as he explained. "Tom Marvolo Riddle," he said, once he had finished writing the name in fiery red and gold letters - which hung suspended in midair. Aware that everyone in the Great Hall was watching closely, particularly the students, Harry reached out and began to nudge the letters into the phrase which caused many of those observing to shudder.

Fudge looked at the words hovering before him in disbelief and awe. His mouth opened and closed silently several times before he managed to half-whisper, "By the Maker."

"Lord Voldemort. Tom Riddle," supplied Ginny, waving her hand through the words and causing them to dissipate.

"Despite however much you'd like to protest over it, however much you try to stick your head in the ground and ignore it, Voldemort is back," declared Harry. "Getting you to admit the fact, even if I had to resort to such methods, was far more important to the safety of the world than catering to your idiotic ego."

"I'll have your wand snapped in two for this, Potter!" yelled Fudge, apparently of the opinion that if he made a big enough noise about it he would actually be able to accomplish it.

"Wand?" Harry made a display of holding his empty hands up for all to see. He looked at Fudge in mock puzzlement and asked, "What wand?"

Not very observant, is he?

~To be fair. Isis, not very many people have noticed that Harry's given me his wand to use until I get mine replaced~ Ginny reluctantly admitted.

Perhaps, but still...

"I haven't used a wand, Fudge, since shortly after the last attack on Hogwarts," Harry explained for everyone to hear. He ducked his head fractionally so that he could glare at the Minister from beneath his lashes - something that he knew made him look more than a little menacing. "You remember the attack, don't you?" he asked softly, but using the Order's power to project his words throughout the

hall. He stepped closer to Fudge, who was beginning to look apprehensive as Harry bore down on him. "The one *your* blind obstinance aided in the implementation of?"

The Great Hall was deathly silent, save for the soft rap of Harry's dragon hide boots on the stone floor and Fudge - who was breathing heavily as he backed away from Harry as he pressed closer to Fudge with each step.

"How many people died, *Minister*," Harry asked insistently, having backed Fudge into the Hufflepuff table until the shorter wizard could no longer retreat without tripping over the bench of students behind him, "because of what you did? Tell me - *how many*?"

"I - I don't know," Fudge admitted desperately.

"Well, I do," snapped Harry, his temper momentarily getting the better of his control and almost managing to slip to the surface. As it was the air about him was crackling and shimmering with the energy flocking around him. "D'you want me to list their names for you? In alphabetical order?"

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Dumbledore, who had been watching closely, stepped forward and spoke soothingly to Harry before his magic could take any unintentional action. "I don't believe that will be necessary, Harry."

"I believe it is," Harry replied curtly. He looked at Dumbledore and nodded his head at Fudge, who was trying to regain his composure. "This... travesty of a Minister has, through his negligence, cost hundreds - thousands of people their lives."

Listen to Dumbledore, Harry, urged Sun Tzu.

Yes, he does have a point, agreed Quetz. **You don't need to utterly destroy Fudge, however gratifying it might be, especially when he seems to be doing a good enough job of it on his own.**

He's practically committed political suicide coming here to confront you like this.

Harry glanced to his side and met Ginny's gaze. He knew she would support him fully in just about anything, but some part of him cringed at the thought of having her watch him verbally batter Fudge into a blubbering mass - even if the Minister deserved it. Heaving a deep breath and letting it out in a long sigh, Harry turned his back on Fudge and reluctantly agreed, "Perhaps you're right, Albus. There's no point in wasting my time or effort on this... politician."

"I will not rest until I have you for this, Potter!" Fudge all but shouted, apparently not able to recognise that Harry had just completely dismissed him.

"You can try," answered Harry, not bothering to turn around as he resumed his place at the dinner table. "You won't succeed."

"Don't be so sure of that, you insolent brat!" snarled Fudge, clearly incensed that Harry was being so indifferent to his threat. "I am the Minister of Magic."

Harry still did not turn to look at the Minister, but he did incline his head a fraction as he agreed, "For the moment, but not for very much longer."

"Quite true, Harry," agreed Dumbledore. The headmaster was favouring Fudge with an almost pitying expression as he spoke. "I have very little doubt that once this encounter between the two of you becomes public knowledge --which it no doubt shall once all our students write home about it-- that you, Cornelius, will be finding yourself on the wrong side of the Wizengamot."

"Mark my words, boy - and you too, Dumbledore," Fudge declared, jabbing his finger from one to the other. "Once I'm done with you, you shall both rue this day."

"If anyone's going to rue the day, *Minister*" --Harry spat the man's title-- "it will be you. I guarantee it."

"Is that a threat?"

"If you want to make it one."

Nobody spoke as Fudge alternately turned ghostly pale and then a livid red before jerking away and storming out of the Great Hall in a huff of indignant fury. Harry, remaining unmoved at the Gryffindor table, resumed his dinner as though nothing had happened and was soon joined by Ginny, Ron and Hermione. It was not until Dumbledore returned to his place at the staff table that the normal level of conversation resumed.

Suffice to say, the next morning's *Daily Prophet* would prove to be an interesting read.

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28. Setting Tomorrow's Stage

Ginny Weasley was, much to the amusement of everyone in the Gryffindor common room, yelling rather loudly at her boyfriend. This probably would not have drawn so much attention had she not been doing so since almost the moment she had arrived after classes, nearly half an hour ago. Bets were already quietly circulating amongst the Gryffindors as to when the temperamental redhead would cease the verbal abuse and progress to physical assault.

Harry Potter, the much lamented boyfriend of the redhead in question, was more-or-less ignoring the tirade and was instead concentrating on finishing his lesson plan for the following night's Practical Fighting Techniques special revision class. This was not an easy task to accomplish, particularly when taking into account the sheer volume of Ginny's shouting. If anything, the only Weasley girl had most certainly inherited her mother's capacity to shake the proverbial rafters.

"Harry certainly has balls," commented Ron, who had actually stopped focusing on the game of chess he was supposed to be playing, in favour of watching his baby sister rant on at Harry about how her O.W.L.s would be starting the next morning and how the entire thing was entirely Harry's fault.

"At least until Ginny rips them off," replied Hermione softly, also enjoying the spectacle but not to the point where she was ignoring her game against Ron.

"Fortune favours the bold," shrugged Ron as Ginny grabbed Harry by the front of his robes and began shaking him back and forth.

Hermione only noted dryly, "When it doesn't kill them."

Harry, who was in the process of prying himself free of Ginny's grasp, looked over at his friend and exclaimed, "Thanks for the support!"

"Pleasure's mine, Harry."

Ginny, who seemed somewhat put out by the fact that Harry was not focusing exclusively on her accusations, smacked him on the arm. "Pay attention when I'm yelling at you," she told him when his head turned back to her.

Harry arched an eyebrow. "I always pay attention to you, love. Especially when you're shouting."

"Hard not to," added Ron cheekily.

"Mhm," agreed Hermione, reaching out with her right hand to shakily move her bishop from one end of the chessboard to the other. She grinned impishly at Ron and announced, "Check."

"What?"

Ginny, who was now also focusing on her friend and brother rather than solely Harry, pouted and folded her arms across her chest. "You're not taking me seriously. This is important."

"Of course, we're taking you seriously, Gin," said Harry, sliding his arm around Ginny's waist and leading her away from the fireplace towards the table where Ron and Hermione were sitting.

"Speak for yourself," Ron muttered as he scrutinised the chessboard in an attempt to work out just how exactly Hermione had managed to corner his king in the manner she had. The only person to ever beat him at chess was Harry - and then only because he had the assistance of some of the greatest strategists in history. There was no way the young wizard was about to let his girlfriend, as intelligent as she was, add her name to that very short list.

"It's just that you're overreacting, Ginny," said Hermione as Harry and Ginny sat down in the couch flanking the table where she and Ron were playing.

Ginny looked unhappily at her and rejoined, "That's a laugh coming from you. This time last year you were panicking so much you made Neville seem like a stoic by comparison."

"I did not!" protested Hermione half-heartedly.

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"Actually..." began Ron, but trailed off at his girlfriend's pointed look, "never mind."

She certainly has him well trained, doesn't she? observed a bemused sounding Osiris.

Heracle's voice was equalled bemused as he asked, **And you're saying Isis doesn't have you equally under her thumb?**

Er...

"The point is, Gin," said Harry, pulling Ginny close to him and kissing her forehead, "you're worrying over nothing. You've studied all the work, you know your stuff and you're going to do brilliantly. You need to relax, before you work yourself into such a state that you'll do badly because you're not focused."

"That's easy for you to say," Ginny countered, but not with much conviction. "You managed to net ten O.W.L.s last year."

Harry rolled his eyes and shrugged. "I don't see how you can make a fuss about it. I got less than Hermione. She got fourteen."

"Two more than Percy," agreed Ron, who was in the process of launching a counterattack to Hermione's challenge. He looked across the chessboard and smiled at her, silently conveying his pride in her exceptional performance. It had been over three decades since a student had managed fourteen O.W.L.s.

"That's only because you take less classes than she does," said Ginny. "You dropped Divination last year, remember? And without Arithmancy or Ancient Runes..."

"You should've seen the look on ol' Trelawney's face when she found out, mate," declared Ron, sinking back into his chair and smiling wistfully at the memory.

Harry chuckled and said, "I wish we could've seen the look on Snape's face when he heard I'd got an Outstanding for Potions. That would've been a picture to keep."

Hermione, who was frowning at the chessboard --no longer holding the superior position she had managed to achieve while Ron was distracted-- said, "He shouldn't have really been too surprised. After all, you were doing brilliantly the entire year, thanks to the Order. The way you burst his little bubble during our first class should have made that perfectly obvious."

"Ah, Snape's a narrow sighted git," replied Ron, moving his one remaining knight to counter the move Hermione had just made. "If it weren't so big he probably wouldn't be able to see the tip of his own nose."

"Ron," protested Ginny, stifling a giggle, "you shouldn't be making remarks like that about our favourite professor."

"Yesterday you were the one who called him a--" began Ron, but was cut off when Ginny reached out and clamped her hand firmly over his mouth before he could finish.

"Let's forget that little scene, shall we?" she asked sweetly before disengaging Harry's arm from around her waist and standing up. She looked around the common room, noticing --now that her haranguing of Harry was over-- that most of the Gryffindors had departed for the Great Hall. "It's just about time for dinner. Want to head down now, or d'you want to finish your match first?"

Breathing a resigned sigh, Hermione rose to her feet and nodded. "Let's go. I don't know how he did it," she said, waving at the chessboard, "but Ron's snatched a victory from the jaws of defeat yet again."

Ron grinned and looked to Harry. "Good teachers, I guess."

The journey from Gryffindor tower to the Great Hall was a relaxed one which seemed to pass in almost no time at all. Harry and Hermione led the way, quietly discussing Hermione's strategy during her chess match with Ron. Apparently Sun Tzu and several other members of the Order were quite impressed by her performance. Ron and Ginny brought up the rear of the quartet. Ginny was trying to tease Ron about the near miss wherein Hermione had checked his king. Ron, whose mind had a tendency to leap from one topic to another with mercurial speed --one side-effect of the coma he had been in earlier that year-- was discussing, mostly to himself, the merits of using olive oil when cooking.

Ginny, who had most certainly *not* inherited her mother's abilities in the kitchen --her culinary disasters were legendary in the Weasley household, each attempt become progressively indigestible, much to Molly's chagrin-- wisely refrained from commenting.

Arriving at the Great Hall, which was still filling up, the four students took their customary places at the Gryffindor table. Harry and Ginny immediately began to help themselves to the lasagne, while Hermione decided on shepherd's pie. Ron, who had changed topics once again and was now muttering something about an oscillation overthrunder, piled his plate with lamb chops and mash.

They had barely begun to tuck in, Ron with his normal excessive enthusiasm, when the stern form of Professor McGonagall strode up to the table. She had stood up from the staff table and had begun making her way to where they were sitting the moment they had entered the hall. Harry set his knife and fork down when she approached and looked up with polite curiosity, waiting for her to speak.

"Mister Potter," she addressed him in a quiet voice, "the headmaster would like a word with you and Miss Weasley in his office after dinner."

"Ah, yes Professor," he responded, somewhat surprised by the request.

As McGonagall returned to the staff table, after nodding briefly, Harry looked to where Dumbledore was sitting, chatting cheerfully to Professor Sinistra. The only absentees amongst the staff were Hagrid (whom Harry knew was preparing some "magnificent" beast for the fifth-years upcoming O.W.L.), Trelawney (who seldom came down from her tower anyway) and Snape (which was something of a plus as far as Harry was concerned - in that the potion master's absence aided his digestion).

After waiting a minute to catch Dumbledore's eye, Harry shot the headmaster a curious glance.

Dumbledore barely acknowledged him beyond a fractional nod, clearly meaning that everything would be explained in his office.

Ginny leaned close to him and whispered, just loud enough for Ron and Hermione to hear as well,

"What d'you think this is about?"

"Haven't a clue."

"Do you think, maybe, it's about You-Know-Who?" asked Ron.

Harry shrugged and resumed eating his lasagne. "I can't rightly say," he mumbled around a mouthful.

"It's as likely as anything else, I suppose."

Rather surprisingly they were able to continue their quiet discussion for some time before they, or anybody else for that matter, realized that visitors had arrived at Hogwarts and entered the Great Hall.

This might have had something to do with the fact that, for the first time in a long while, the doors leading from the Entrance Hall to the Great Hall were *not* closed. As such, the unexpected visitors arrived without any fanfare (normally the loud clang of the doors swinging open served as such) to announce their presence.

This was why everyone was taken rather by surprise when one visitor raised his wand over his head and fired a spray of sparks and flares into the air, accompanied by a loud ringing tone that was vaguely reminiscent of a Muggle police siren. Suffice to say the display was sufficient to catch everyone's attention and focus their eyes on the two figures standing in the middle of the hall.

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"May I have your attention," declared the shorter of the two, who was the one that had not raised his wand. He was a rather inconspicuous looking character, without anything in particular to set him apart in a crowd. His bearing, however, was distinctly authoritative but underlaid with a deep seated arrogance - the bearing of a man who was smugly convinced of his own superiority, who was used to having people do as he said, when he said and how he said, and who was not troubled when he had to step over (or on top of as it were) someone else in order to get what he wanted.

"Ah," said Dumbledore, effectively drawing attention away from the two visiting wizards and to the staff table, where the headmaster had risen to his feet. "Mister Krendler and Mister Coffey, I was not informed that you would be joining us for dinner tonight."

"We're not," replied the taller of the pair in a curt and no nonsense voice.

Polite pair, aren't they? Beowulf asked sarcastically.

Must be bureaucrats, decided Heracles.

~From the Ministry?~ asked Ginny. *~What could they possibly want?~*

Harry was watching expectantly. *We're about to find out.*

The shorter wizard drew himself up pompously and, not bothering to acknowledge Dumbledore, reached into his puce coloured robes to pull out an official looking piece of parchment. With the exaggerated movements of an actor on stage, one who knows that all eyes are on him, he lifted the parchment up and began to read in a tone as pompous as his stance.

"By official Ministry decree," he stated, "I, Director of Public Safety, Paul Krendler, am hereby charged with the task of placing one Harry James Potter under arrest. For the crimes of treason, hearsay, gross public slander, undermining Ministry authority and disturbing the peace, the accused to be taken into immediate custody by the Auror division stationed at Hogwarts. Once detained he is to

be transported to a high security holding cell at the Ministry where he will await trial and sentencing. Signed, Minister of Magic Cornelius Fudge and Under-Secretary Dolores Umbridge."

The silence that descended over the Great Hall was so complete that it would have been possible to hear a pin drop halfway around the world. Everyone, from the students to the professors to the Aurors, was staring at Krendler in combined disbelief and incomprehension. Even the Slytherins, most of whom would normally be cheering by now, seemed to be simply too dumbfounded by the sheer audacity of this proclamation to do anything more than gape and stare.

Oh-kay...

Krendler lowered the decree and returned it to its place within his puce business robes. He looked around the hall, a smugly confident smirk worthy of any Slytherin twisting his lips, and finally settled his narrow gaze on where Harry was sitting. The smirk grew broader until his teeth, small and sharp looking, became visible. Without bothering to look in the direction of the small table set to one side near the main doors, for any off duty Aurors that were dining with the students, he ordered, "Idaho, you know what to do."

"Yes, I suppose I do," agreed Duncan Idaho, who was in charge of the Auror division stationed at the school. The dark haired wizard, dressed in his usual black with green trimmed robes, slowly rose to his feet. All eyes in the Great Hall shifted from either Harry (who was watching the proceedings with remarkable calm) or Krendler (who seemed almost predatory in his anticipation) to Idaho, whose face seemed to be chiselled from stone.

Harry, who had until now been coolly evaluating Krendler and Coffey, turned his eyes to Idaho. The head Auror was standing at his place at the Auror's table, his eyes hooded in shadow but sparkling black as they focused on Harry. One corner of his mouth curled down in a grimace of distaste for the task set for him and his men. He glanced to his friend Gurney Halleck, who had been sitting next to him, and then returned his gaze to Harry.

"Aurors," Idaho spoke, his voice ringing clear and precise throughout the hall, "dismissed."

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Moving as one, timed so precisely it seemed as if they had rehearsed it, the dozen or so Aurors that were sitting at their table put down their utensils and set aside their unfinished meals. Still maintaining that almost unnatural synchronization, they stood up en masse and began to exit the Great Hall without so much as a backwards glance at the dumbstruck Director Krendler.

"What?"

"I'm sorry, Director," explained Idaho laconically as he too made his way to the wide-open doors leading out of the hall, "but my men and I are off duty at the moment."

"Aye. In other words," agreed Halleck, his scarred face twisted in an unattractive smile as he followed a step behind his superior, "find someone else to do Fudge's dirty work."

"But, but, but it's an official Ministry decree!" protested Krendler. "You can't simply refuse to carry it out!"

His objections were completely ignored by the Aurors who calmly filed out of the Great Hall, moving in groups of threes and fours. From what Harry could make out from his position at the Gryffindor table, most of them had satisfied smiles on their faces or were nodding their heads as they talked quietly to their companions.

Superb, gloated Beowulf. **All your efforts to befriend the Aurors is paying off, Harry.**

~And paying off handsomely too~ agreed Ginny, smiling at Harry.

"Idaho!" Krendler bellowed as the last couple of Aurors slipped out, "I'll have your commissions for this! Your wands too! You can join Potter in Azkaban!"

"Please, Director Krendler," interrupted Dumbledore, who was standing and looking at the two intruders with a hint of disapproval, "there's no need to shout."

"Shut up, you senile old fool!" barked Krendler, whirling to face the headmaster. His hands were clenched into tight fists at his sides as he ground out through clenched teeth, "This is no concern of yours! This is official Ministry business."

Dumbledore drew himself up and glared across the length of the Great Hall, his eyes glittering dangerously over the rims of his glasses. His voice, though not raised so much as a single notch in volume, sounded like rumbling thunder. "As headmaster of Hogwarts, Mister Potter's safety falls under my jurisdiction."

"Your jurisdiction is irrelevant," countered Coffey, speaking up. "Potter is under arrest."

Professor McGonagall rose to her feet with a huff, looking positively livid. Her lips were drawn into such a thin line that they had almost vanished from sight. She was clearly preparing to start bellowing her indignation at the two Ministry wizards, but was restrained by Dumbledore's hand on her shoulder. The headmaster did not look at her, keeping his burning gaze fixed on Krendler, but shook his head a fraction. "Minerva, please remain calm."

"Albus..." she protested tightly, but backed down and contented herself to glare daggers at Krendler from Dumbledore's side.

Dumbledore inclined his head a little in Krendler's direction. "I would advise you, Director, not to antago--"

"I won't tell you again, Dumbledore," interrupted Krendler, cutting the air in front of him with a sharp motion of his hand, "this is none of your business."

"I have made it my business," Dumbledore informed him, an aura of restrained power beginning to gather around him as a warning.

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"Forget about it being your business, Headmaster," declared Harry, rising to his feet and drawing

everyone's attention away from Dumbledore and Krendler. He hid a smile, certain that were Snape present he would be muttering something about how Harry could not resist being the centre of attention. He smiled ruefully and remarked, "Everyone seems to have forgotten to ask my opinion about all this."

Krendler snorted indignantly and sneered, "Don't make me laugh. Your opinion is as worthless as his is. As an underage wizard you have no choice in the matter. The decision is made. You are *under arrest*!"

Before Harry could say anything, he felt movement at his side and saw Ginny pushing herself to her feet and glaring at Krendler in a manner not unlike her mother, Molly. His girlfriend set both hands on her hips and asked, "Oh really?"

"Don't be a fool, Potter," Krendler said, more or less ignoring Ginny. "If you try to hide behind your friends..."

Harry shook his head and corrected, "I never hide behind my friends, sir. I stand up front with them by my sides."

Krendler leaned forward, as if trying to intimidate Harry, and threatened, "If they try to cause trouble I'll be forced to deal with them as well."

That was a mistake, decided Harry, knowing his friends. *He just made them angry.*

There was a loud scraping sound from behind Harry and Ginny as Ron, who was sitting opposite them, pushed his dinner plate out of the way before jumping angrily to his feet. His wand was in his hand, but not yet pointed at anyone, as he sent a glare towards Krendler that matched Ginny's almost identically.

"Please, try."

"Yes, please do," agreed Hermione, also standing up from her place next to Ron. Her wand was also in her hand, but like Ron's also held loosely at her side.

The Director glared at the four students with what could only be described as loathing. He muttered something, undoubtedly profane, under his breath before jerking his head towards them and ordering, "Coffey."

"Your friend may be an Auror, Director Krendler, but it's four against one," cautioned Harry as Coffey shifted in preparation to attack. Harry did not have his wand, having loaned it to Ginny for the remainder of the school year, but it was simple enough to call the Order's power to him, quickly matching and then exceeding Dumbledore's powerful aura. He shook his head as he looked into Coffey's eyes. "I strongly suggest you rethink this."

Coffey matched Harry's gaze for a long minute, the tension between the two growing and growing with each passing heartbeat. Sweat began to bead on the Auror's forehead and his entire body seemed to be straining against an invisible pressure. Coffey shook his head to clear the sweat which had dripped into his eyes and tried to return Harry's stare, but found himself unable to. Harry appeared perfectly composed in every aspect, looking as if he were entirely willing to keep the staring match going for the rest of the night and the whole of the following day.

Finally, when it seemed that something would have to give, the silent confrontation came to an abrupt end. Coffey, sucking in a deep breath to steady himself, took two steps back so that he was standing just behind Krendler, clearly preferring to leave Harry in the Director's hands.

Krendler, whose confident expression had slowly dwindled away, looked positively aghast as he found himself facing down Harry and his friends completely without support. His position was about to become even less tenable as Dumbledore, who had come out from behind the staff table, calmly made his way towards the Gryffindor table. The power radiating off Harry at the moment was prodigious. Combined with Dumbledore's crackling air of authority it would have sent any intelligent person scrambling for cover.

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"Dammit all, this is an official Ministry decree!" Krendler cried in one last desperate attempt to tilt the balance back into his favour. He spun around to encompass the entire hall as he made his offer. "By the authority vested in me by the Minister of Magic himself, I will hand over a *substantial reward* to anyone who will assist in bringing this - this criminal into Ministry custody!"

****He has got to be joking.****

****Either that or he is a greater fool that we first thought.****

~Probably the latter, Miko~ Ginny decided.

Harry raised his eyebrows incredulously at Krendler's statement. By now Dumbledore had arrived and was standing at Harry's right shoulder. With Ginny at his left shoulder, Ron and Hermione immediately behind him on the other side of the table (not to mention the rest of Gryffindor), Harry did not believe anybody present would actually think they could accomplish something.

"I will."

Those two words would have silenced the hall, had it not already been as quiet as a cemetery.

Everyone turned or craned their heads to look at the source of the voice which had called out. It had come from the other side of the hall from the Gryffindor table, where a slender figure had risen to her feet at the Slytherin table. An explosion of whispers and murmurs, a good number of them furious and indignant, erupted from the students as Blaise Zabini began walking to where a now smiling Krendler stood.

Harry felt as if a leaden weight had settled in his stomach as he watched the beautiful blonde witch approach. Out of all the Slytherins, a dozen or so of which he had come to respect, Blaise was the only one he considered as something of a friend. She had silently supported him through their fourth year, regularly visited him when he was in the Hospital Wing and had even kept quiet about the meetings

with his godfather, Sirius, that she had once walked in on. He had believed her to be fiercely loyal to her friends and probably the only witch who could challenge Hermione for the position of Headgirl the next school year. She even had a sense of humour which rivalled that of the twins.

To have her turn against him like this was a telling blow, one which almost caused the aura he was radiating to falter and fade away. It was only thanks to the Order that he was able to maintain it, though not as prominently as before. He was more concerned with the struggle he faced in trying to keep the dismay and feelings of betrayal growing inside him from showing themselves on his features. "I'll help you take Potter into custody, Director Krendler," Blaise announced in a clear voice as she sashayed over to them. She smiled, perhaps a tad condescendingly at Krendler. "I will even personally hand him over to you."

"Finally. Someone with some sense in their heads," Krendler crowed with obvious delight. Though he did not move the Director gave the impression that he would be rubbing his hands together in glee if he did.

"Unfortunately," Blaise continued, "there's one little detail we have to clear up first."

"About the reward? Of course, I--"

Blaise, who was now standing right in front of Harry, almost toe-to-toe with him, snorted in a very unladylike fashion. She chuckled under her breath and shook her head, not bothering to look back at Krendler. Looking into Harry's eyes, her own sparkling a brilliant blue that was laden with both mischief and determination, she flicked her wrist in a familiar and well practised motion.

"The only way I'm ever going to let you sink your bureaucrat's claws into Harry," she said, turning around to reveal that she had drawn her wand and was now aiming it at a spot directly between Krendler's eyes, "is if you can get through me first."

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If Blaise's first announcement had effectively silenced the Great Hall, this one pretty much dealt it a death blow. Everyone stared at the grim (but still smirking) Slytherin in either awed disbelief or total incomprehension. Harry, who had been unknowingly holding his breath, released a quiet sigh and found himself grinning. He glanced at Ginny, who was staring at Blaise with an uplifted expression, and then at Dumbledore, whose blue eyes were twinkling merrily. Krendler, for his part, seemed to be imitating a fish flopping about on dry land.

I think I like this girl, observed Osiris gleefully.

Like her? asked Harry, staring at Blaise with delight. *If I didn't already have Ginny, I'd be tempted to fall in love with her right now.*

~Go ahead~ offered Ginny, *~I just might join you.~*

Yeh'll have to expand yer bed in that case. Loki leered suggestively, never one to pass up an opportunity. **Or, better still, leave it as it is. The more crowded it is the more easily you'll be able to 'cuddle'.**

Loki...

"Bludgie righ'!" exclaimed Moira Mackay fervently, breaking the silence. The feisty third-year jumped out of her seat and, since she was one of the shortest people there, actually leapt up onto the table - kicking a bowl of potato salad aside in the process. In a manner not unlike a cowboy (which Harry had occasionally seen on television at the Dursleys from time to time) she reached into her robes in what looked like a passable cross draw and promptly had a wand in each hand, both aimed at Krendler.

"Harry's nae goin' anywair wuil we kin stan' b'tween him an' th' likes o' ye!"

Krendler looked very much like a man who had just had the proverbial rug pulled out from beneath his feet. Probably some of the stone floor as well. He looked around stammering incoherently, before trying to compose himself. Sucking in a shuddering breath he pointed an accusing finger at the group standing by (and in Moira's case, on) the Gryffindor table. "Now listen here--"

"No - you listen, *Director* Krendler," interrupted Cho Chang, who stepped up from her seat at the Ravenclaw table. Only after Krendler had turned to look at her did she raise her arm and reveal that she too had drawn her wand. She looked at him, her dark eyes glittering severely in the torchlight.

"Hogwarts students know when and how to protect their own - especially when the Ministry of Magic doesn't."

As if taking their cue from Cho and Moira, more students began to rise - all with their wands drawn and all those wands aimed at a single point. Director Krendler. The Gryffindors were quick to take up the call, rising up almost as one and without a single exception. The Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs also produced large numbers of challengers to the Ministry Decree, although a few of the students seemed inclined (if their grins were any indication) to remain in their seats and enjoy the spectacle. Much to everyone's surprise Blaise was not the only Slytherin to rise to Harry's defence. There were not many of them --a fifth, perhaps a quarter of the house at the most-- but it was clear that even the Slytherins were willing to stand alongside the Boy-Who-Lived.

Krendler was looking about in bewilderment. "Now just a damn minute--"

"This will not be necessary," interrupted a familiar voice coming from the doorway leading into the Entrance Hall. There --flanked by all the Aurors that had previously exited the Great Hall, rather than follow the Director's orders-- was standing none other than Arthur Weasley.

~Dad?~ asked Ginny in silent amazement, staring at her father with wide eyes.

What's he doing here? Harry asked, puzzled. *Fudge can't have sent him to arrest me as well, could he?*

Ginny frowned at Harry, *~I should bloody well hope not!~*

Arthur had an eager gleam in his blue eyes as he calmly spoke. "Krendler."

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"Weasley," growled Krendler, having whirled about to face the other wizard. His disdain was clearly

visible as he sneered unpleasantly at Arthur and asked, "What are *you* doing here? This has nothing to do with your department. You should be out taming biting doorknobs and putting out fire-breathing teapots."

Rather than becoming upset at these words, Arthur bobbed his head back and forth in a noncommittal nod as he stated, "Perhaps, perhaps not. In either case, I was the one chosen for this job."

Krendler was about to speak, clearly intending to tell Arthur and those accompanying him that they had no jurisdiction or authority in the matter at hand (or some such nonsense) when Arthur effectively cut him by reaching into his somewhat shabby indigo robes. With a flourish he produced a slip of parchment that he held up high over his head for all to see.

"This," he declared authoritatively, "this is an edict passed down by the Wizengamot, granting Harry Potter amnesty--"

"Amnesty!" exclaimed Krendler.

"Amnesty," Arthur repeated, a faint smile curling his lips, "until such time as the Wizengamot, in an open public hearing, have concluded their deliberations regarding the charges of gross negligence, conspiracy and treason that have been passed against *newly suspended* Minister of Magic Fudge and his hired underlings. One of which, I happen to believe, is *you*, Krendler."

Ho ho, chortled Alexander. **Dumbledore is one sly old wizard, that's for sure.**

~You think he arranged this?~ asked Ginny.

Who else?

Either that or this is just an incredible coincidence.

Harry gave a mental snort. *I don't believe in coincidence.*

The voices were smug as they chimed, **Precisely.**

"What? But, but I - I was..." Krendler was stuttering almost incoherently as he frantically looked from one Auror to another as they began filing back into the Great Hall, taking up positions along the four house tables. "This has to be some sort of a mistake..."

"Oh, it's no mistake, lad," declared a very smug looking Alastor Moody, who stepped out from behind Arthur once all of the Aurors had passed. His scarred face was twisted into an ugly parody of a grin as he confirmed, "It's a fact, signed and stamped unanimously by the Wizengamot."

Arthur, now sporting his own small smile of satisfaction, politely asked, "Duncan, would you be so kind as to place those two men under arrest?"

Idaho, who was standing not far from Krendler and Coffey with several of his best lieutenants, grinned with relish and nodded. "With pleasure, Arthur."

For some reason (Harry could hazard a guess why) not one of the students watching lowered their wands until only after Idaho and half a dozen Aurors had crowded around the two Ministry wizards and begun leading them away. Coffey, as Harry had expected, followed his fellow Aurors lead with no complaint or resistance - keeping his cool and holding his head high. Krendler, to no one's surprise, reacted in completely the opposite fashion. It took the combined efforts of Gurney Halleck and three others to physically restrain the man before Idaho simply lost patience with the matter and proceeded to stun Krendler into submission.

"Sorry for the disturbance," apologised Arthur, with a grin to Harry, Hermione and his two children, as the Aurors dragged Krendler's limp form out of the Great Hall. He waved happily at the assembled students and told them all, "Please enjoy the rest of your meal."

"Mister Weasley certainly has good timing," commented Harry to anyone that was listening as the doors slowly swung shut behind the departing wizards.

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"Yes indeed," Dumbledore amiably agreed. "We were most fortuitous when young Percival learnt of the Minister's plans to have you taken into custody. The situation might have become rather grim had we not been able to plan accordingly."

"*Might* have?" repeated Ginny incredulously. She looked at the headmaster narrowly and informed him in no uncertain terms, "Respectfully, sir, it *would* have become *very* grim if Fudge and his idiots had tried to take Harry away."

"I don't doubt that for a second, Virginia," replied Dumbledore, smiling benevolently. He looked over to Harry before making his way back to his seat at the staff table. "I expect to see you in my office immediately after dinner, Harry."

Harry nodded in acknowledgement and replied softly, "We'll be there."

He was about to turn to Blaise, who had tucked her wand back up the sleeve of her robe, when two hulking shadows appeared before them. The Gryffindors, who might have been willing to allow Blaise safe access to their table, were less than willing to allow Crabbe and Goyle to stray as close and promptly reached for their wands again. Waving them off, mostly because he knew that neither of the pair posed much in the way of a threat, Harry watched quietly as the two Slytherin wizards stood before Blaise.

"What d'you think you were doing?" asked Goyle, glowering at Blaise.

"Standing by the people I trust, Gar," Blaise answered coolly, meeting Goyle's accusing glare without so much as a flicker. Goyle's scowl deepened at the use of his nickname, which had first been thought up by Fred and George shortly after the two Slytherins had first come to Hogwarts.

Crabbe, who was glowering in identical fashion to Goyle, crossed his arms over his barrel chest and stated, as though it were not perfectly obvious, "They're Gryffindors."

Hermione rolled her eyes and quipped, "My, but they're sharp tonight."

It took several seconds but eventually the derision in Hermione's voice must have become apparent to Crabbe, as he swivelled to turn his glare towards her. He uncrossed his arms and began to reach for his

wand, but froze when he noticed that both she and Ron still had their wands drawn and loosely pointed in the general direction of the two Slytherins.

"Where were you two when they handed out the brains?" asked Blaise rhetorically as Crabbe stood back and tried not to look as though he had backed down.

"Obviously not wherever you were," Crabbe retorted dumbly.

"Promise me something, Vinnie," Blaise implored, after rolling her eyes and shaking her head in resignation. "Never breed."

Goyle, who had been watching closely, furrowed his brow in confusion. "Er..."

Blaise sighed, clearly resigned to the fact that the two wizards were thicker than bricks and not likely to ever evolve beyond that. She looked at Harry and shook her head again before shooing her housemates away. "Just go back to the dormitories and practice your singing."

Oddly enough neither of the one-time bodyguards to Draco Malfoy resisted her orders. With only a token grumble and vaguely scathing glare Crabbe and Goyle wandered off in the general direction of the Slytherin table, thus leaving Blaise in the company of the Gryffindors.

"Singing?" asked Ron, watching at they sat themselves down and began gathering enough food to rival even his own near legendary appetite.

"Don't ask. You'll sleep better not knowing," replied Blaise.

She was about to leave, to rejoin her housemates, when Harry reached out and caught her elbow.

Blaise looked back at him, raising an eyebrow in query. He looked at her, making sure to use his best solemn expression as he intoned, "Zabini."

Blaise raised her other eyebrow level with the first and asked, "Yes, Potter?"

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Harry smiled broadly and beckoned with one hand for her to join them. The Gryffindors, clearly understanding his meaning, shifted aside enough to make a place for her at the table as Harry said, "I'm very glad to have you as a friend."

She looked at him for a second, eyebrows almost cresting her hairline in surprise, before returning his smile with a grin of her own. Bowing her head in thanks and settling down in the seat he was offering, she concluded, "With luck we'll live to be old friends."

Severus Snape would much rather have been in the Great Hall, finishing his dinner, than where he was at the moment. It was not the fact that Fudge's bumbling attempt at arresting Potter, which Dumbledore had learnt of before hand, should have been taking place right about then that made the potions master want to be back at Hogwarts. Though the sight would doubtless have been a gratifying one, it was more the fact that Snape would rather have been *anywhere* than in the Dark Lord's presence.

I am a spy, and a good one, he thought with only a smidgeon of pride, *but nothing is without its risks. And venturing into this snake's lair is a venture far riskier than any other.*

Also, for a man that spent a great deal of time in the dungeons, Snape was fastidious in the extreme. Though potions tended to get rather messy at times, particularly when Longbottom was melting his latest cauldron, Snape understood and appreciated that keeping a work area clean and spotless greatly reduced any chances of a mishap.

Which was why Snape regarded his current surroundings with a sneer of repulsion, thankfully hidden beneath the skull-like Death Eater mask he wore, that would have caused the more timid Hufflepuff first-years to wet themselves.

His sneer intensified further as he once again surreptitiously looked around and evaluated the chamber he stood in. He did not know where Voldemort had summoned him to this time, the Dark Mark on his arm still throbbed slightly, but it was a dank and mildew infested place.

No doubt the Gryffindors, and most of the other students other than my Slytherins, would think me perfectly at home here.

The stone walls were stained black in places from water, or blood, and crumbling slightly in others.

Weak torches flickered in their holders, some of them dangling precariously, and cast dark and ominous shadows all round. The other assembled Death Eaters, several dozen of them, waited patiently (or pretended to) along the sides of the chamber - leaving the centre of the room open for whatever black magicks Voldemort had planned.

The twin pentagrams, apparently drawn on the floor with blood, did not bode well.

"The potion, Severus."

"My Lord," Snape responded crisply, not letting on for a moment that his thoughts had been focused upon something other than the Dark Lord. He stepped away from the other Death Eaters and took four paces forward before settling down on one knee. "As you requested. Enough for two dozen doses."

Reaching into his pocket Snape withdrew a tiny crystal vial --no bigger than his small finger-- and offered it to Voldemort without looking up. It took all his self-discipline not to dash the vial on the floor, shattering it and its contents. He could not grasp Dumbledore's intentions in letting him brew this potion for Voldemort to use. Then it was too late, as the Dark Lord plucked the proffered vial from his hand.

"So little, yet requiring so much time to complete," Voldemort commented, holding the vial up to the unsteady torchlight. He inspected the iridescent fluid within for a long time, checking that it matched the description given in the ancient tome in which he had learnt of the potion and its uses. Finally satisfied with the quality of the potion, Voldemort nodded and waved for Snape to rejoin the Death Eater ranks. "You have done well, Severus. I am pleased."

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"Thank you, Master," Snape replied, rising up and moving away - careful not to turn his back towards Voldemort.

Now that Snape could see more than just the hem of Voldemort's robes, he carefully considered the Dark Lord as he seemed to glide into place between the two bloody pentagrams. Voldemort seemed thinner, if possible, than when last Snape had seen him a month before. Of course, it was hard to tell underneath the robes. What he could tell, quite easily by comparison, was that Voldemort's face and hands were bleached so pale that at first glance the Dark Lord looked the very image of the Grim Reaper. Snape was willing to bet that every inch of Voldemort's skin was equally white - like porcelain. His skeletal face was further marred by a fine tracery of blue and black veins which radiated out from his temples and up from beneath the neck of his robes. Only his narrow red eyes remained as Snape remembered; gleaming in the subdued light and lit by some inner fire.

"The ranks of my Death Eaters have suffered greatly these past few months," Voldemort spoke softly, his voice hinting at his displeasure. He held the vial before him, where all the Death Eaters could clearly see it and told them, "Now with the aid of this Tantalus Potion and my own genius, I shall regain the services of my most trusted and valued followers."

This was news that Snape would rather *not* have heard, though some part of him sat up in intellectual curiosity. He had no way to be sure, but hearing this seemed to confirm his suspicions - which he had told Dumbledore of shortly after being handed this assignment.

"Wormtail," called Voldemort expectantly. Everyone waited anxiously, but the Dark Lord's servant did not make a prompt appearance. Voldemort repeated himself, baring his teeth and snapping,

"Wormtail!"

"Mmh-mhm-muh-mas-s-s-ster."

Snape had not seen Peter Pettigrew since the night of the Valentine's attack on Hogwarts, nearly three months before. His first thought now was, *Voldemort was not pleased with you, was he, Pettigrew? It's a miracle you're still alive, unlike Macnair. Perhaps being kept like this is part of your punishment.* Pettigrew shuffled into the room, perhaps the most pathetic sight any of those present had ever seen. He was hunched over, bent almost double, and scuffed his feet against the floor as if he were a sickly old man fifty years past his prime. Clutched to his chest was the gruesomely scarred stump of his right hand, which he had sacrificed as part of the ritual to resurrect Voldemort two years ago. At the time the Dark Lord had gifted him with a gleaming silver hand as a replacement, in many ways more effective than a wand, but now it seemed that Voldemort had rescinded his gift as part of Pettigrew's punishment for failing to kill Ginny Weasley during the Valentine's attack.

It was only when Pettigrew stumbled out of the passageway he arrived through and into the light that Snape caught a good enough view of him to clearly see the other marks of Voldemort's displeasure. The left side of Pettigrew's face was slack and immobile, looking as if his skin had partially melted like a wax figurine. This, Snape recognised, was a sign of what the Muggle's called a stroke - a common outcome of being tortured under the Cruciatus Curse for a long period of time, but with enough breaks to prevent the onset of madness.

Better to have died, thought Snape, sternly holding back a shudder.

Voldemort waited impatiently, looking as if he were about to start tapping his foot while he waited, as Pettigrew approached. The stooped little man came up to the Dark Lord as if he were drawing ever closer to a particularly venomous serpent --which in a way he was-- and held out his remaining hand in offering.

Taking charge of the two plain, but very complex, bronze circlets which Pettigrew had brought him, Voldemort hissed angrily. "Do not keep me waiting again, you miserable little rodent."

Pettigrew cringed and tried to stutter out an apology. "S-s-s-s-sorr-r-ryy, Mmh-mhm-muh-ma--" His attempt was cut off abruptly as Voldemort lifted up his free hand, wand held in it, and snapped, "*Crucio!*"

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The cries of pain with escaped Pettigrew's throat, through a spray of saliva, barely seemed to be human. Pettigrew collapsed to the floor in a boneless heap, twisting and churning about in ways that contrasted sharply with his earlier infirm movements. Voldemort, his eyes narrowed to fine slits, finally released the curse.

"Get out," he ordered Pettigrew, not bothering to wait for the man to catch his breath. When Pettigrew did not immediately rise and leave, he yelled an angry, "Now!"

It was a measure of his terror and desperation that Pettigrew was able to force his tortured body into motion. Stumbling up onto his feet he fled the chamber as if being chased by the very hounds that guarded the gate to Hades. Considering the company, that probably wasn't far off.

"I do not suffer fools or failures," Voldemort commented as Pettigrew disappeared into the darkness of the nearest passageway. His voice was deceptively calm, a signal that those around him should tread even more carefully than usual. "Remember that."

"Yes, my lord!" chorused the Death Eaters, including Snape.

"At the same time, however, I never forget those who serve me faithfully and truly," the Dark Lord continued, now sounding perhaps a trifle reflective. He raised the small vial Snape had delivered in one hand and the two metal bands in the other. His next order was a simple one, "Bring her to me." A trio of Death Eaters separated from the main group and disappeared down a side passage. It took them several minutes, which Snape spent speculating over what would happen next, but they finally returned. The one in the lead was followed a Muggle woman, in reasonable health and not too ragged clothes, which he controlled by means of the Imperius Curse. Without any further instruction he guided the woman to the pentagram at Voldemort's right side, where he bound her in place with a

combination of charms that left her aware but unable to move from the kneeling position he had set her down in.

The last two Death Eaters arrived not long after that, supporting another figure between them. Leading their charge to the pentagram on Voldemort's left, they quickly but carefully placed her --it was obviously a woman-- in an identical position to the Muggle woman. She, however, was not bothering to look around her in the futile hope finding a way out. Instead she swayed in place, as if slightly drunk, and hummed tunelessly beneath the veil of long, stringy hair that fell over her head and kept her face hidden from view.

Having finished their assigned task the three Death Eaters swiftly returned to their places, leaving Voldemort standing in the centre of the room with two bound and completely helpless women. Not what most of them had been expecting earlier that evening to say the least.

"Ah. The most vicious, most cunning, most cruel, most faithful of my servants," Voldemort announced, reaching out to stroke at the tangled black hair of the woman in the left pentacle. He spoke as if reminiscing about a favourite pet. "Azkaban was not kind to you, I fear."

Snape felt his heart skip a beat at those words.

Voldemort stepped into the pentacle and grabbed the woman by the scruff of her neck, forcing her head back. Using his thumb to unstopper the vial of Tantalus Potion, he carefully brought it to her lips, which were parted only a fraction so that she could breathe, and measured out three drops - no more. Resealing the vial and returning it to a pocket in his robes, Voldemort then placed one of the headbands on the woman's head. He then, a little roughly, repeated the procedure on the Muggle woman trapped in the other pentagram. Returning to his place between the two women, Voldemort drew his wand.

"*Bindus Mentalus!*"

A thin tendril of silvery light emerged from the tip of his wand and snaked through the air towards the Muggle woman. Darting forwards, as if it were a predator, it connected with the bronze headband she was wearing. The light grew thicker and a silvery halo surrounded the Muggle as she writhed in blind terror. Voldemort, his eyes narrowed in concentration, twisted and pulled the tendril of light towards the other woman, who seemed completely oblivious to what was happening around her.

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Nudging the light closer he gave a deft flick of his wand and cut the shimmering tendril loose. The now free end immediately slithered forward, clearly guided by some unseen force, until it connected with the other woman's headband. Voldemort was not idle during this, indeed it was a sight to see as he wove his magicks in the air surrounding the twisting strand of light that now connected the two women. This was a reminder to all present that the Dark Lord had earned his reputation as a great and powerful sorcerer with due cause.

Without warning, startling quite a few of the less staid Death Eaters, both women threw back their heads and shrieked in what at first sounded like unadulterated agony. Snape, who was one of the few that had not flinched at the sound, was quick to note the difference between the two cries. The Muggle woman was screaming not in pain, but combined terror and denial - as if something more precious to her than anything else were being stolen. The witch, something the other woman had to be, was screaming in something that approached elation... or release.

Almost as suddenly as it had begun, it was over. With exhausted sighs both women slumped down, held upright only by the charms restraining them in place within the pentagrams. Not bothering with the Muggle, for she was less than nothing to him, Voldemort turned to the woman he had proclaimed as his favourite Death Eater and released her magical bonds.

"Welcome back," he greeted with satisfaction, "Bellatrix Lestrange."

"M - m - my Lord?" rasped the kneeling woman, her voice hoarse and rough from lack of use over many years. She looked up, through the tangled snares of the hair which obscured her face, and gazed around her in apparent confusion. "Where? What has - what has happened to me?"

"I have set you free, Bellatrix," Voldemort told her. "Free of both Azkaban and the prison of your own mind. Free to join me at my side once more."

"Azkaban..." Bellatrix's breath caught as she whispered the word, the memories clearly beginning to return to her. Unable to support herself she toppled to one side, shivering uncontrollably where she lay.

Voldemort, a thin smile still on his lips, turned to the watching Death Eaters and motioned at the same three which had brought Bellatrix and the Muggle into the chamber. "Take her to the rooms set aside for her and then bring in the next one."

The trio hurried forward, two kneeling down to help a trembling Bellatrix to her feet. The third released the Muggle woman from the charms he had placed on her earlier. Now, however, instead of searching for a way out, the Muggle stared at him with blank, uncomprehending eyes - much the same way Bellatrix had reacted when being brought in.

Dumbledore is not going to be pleased, Snape concluded, as the Death Eaters led the two women out of the chamber.

Voldemort, on the other hand, was delighted. He returned to his place between the two pentacles and practically crowed with pleasure over his success. He looked over his assembled Death Eaters and announced haughtily, "Soon the Wizarding World will learn an inescapable truth, one which they have forgotten over the long years of my exile."

Snape repressed a shudder of despair, and another of revulsion, as the three Death Eaters that had led Bellatrix and her sacrificial Muggle out returned. As before, one was leading a Muggle under the Imperius Curse and the other two were gently escorting another of the freed, but until now irreparably

damaged, Azkaban inmates.

"I can be driven back, driven away, driven to the very point of death itself and left dangling on its cusp, but I can never be defeated," Voldemort said, a malicious grin stretching his near lipless mouth and baring his small, sharp teeth. "No matter what they may try, no matter what they may hope, no matter what they may believe... I will always find a way."

Severus could not help but shudder at the tone of the Dark Lord's voice.

"Always."

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29. School's End

It had the makings of a magnificent morning. The sky was a deep, dark blue, which was only just beginning to lighten as the sun crested over the horizon. The birds were starting to sing and a few reluctant students at Hogwarts were struggling to open their eyes and get out of bed.

"Ooooooooooooooh."

Harry woke up feeling worse than he had ever done in all of his sixteen years - which was truly remarkable, if you took into account his frequent awakenings in the Hospital Wing. Without even opening his eyes he knew that this morning was not going to be a pleasant experience. His mouth tasted worse than one of Snape's potions and drier than the Sahara desert, his ears were ringing fit to challenge a fair sized cathedral's bells and he had the distinct impression that if he were to attempt to sit up, his head would fly off his shoulders.

"Ooooooooooooooh," Harry moaned again, reaching up with a hand to tenderly hold his head as he opened his eyes. He immediately used his other hand to try and wandlessly stop the bedroom from spinning around so violently.

"Harry..." whispered a hoarse voice by his side.

Harry grit his teeth and shut his eyes when it became apparent that his wandless magic was not accomplishing anything. He closed his eyes as a last resort to keep the room from spinning any more than it already was. "Gin," he rasped, "don't shout so loudly."

Ginny, who seemed to be in as bad a condition as Harry, turned her head to face him - moving very, very slowly. Her eyes were narrowed to such fine slits it seemed almost as if they were not open at all. She swallowed convulsively several times before venturing, just as softly as before, "It feels like my brains were smashed out of my head by a slice of lemon wrapped around a large gold brick."

"What the hell happened to us?" Harry asked, opening his eyes for a brief moment before shutting them again when this revealed that the room (though by now he suspected it was just him) was still spinning merrily round and round.

"It was that blue stuff," Ginny croaked. "Romulus told us how to make it about halfway through the party. Said it would go down stronger than the Fire Whiskey and smoother than the Butterbeer."

The party. Ah. *That explains it,* Harry thought a trifle blankly. The memories of the previous night were a bit fuzzy, after a point, but he was slowly beginning to recollect some of what had happened.

"It was some kind of ale, I think."

Ginny nodded, but winced immediately as the action doubtless only served to make her pounding head hurt even more than it already was. She took several deep and, hopefully, steadying breaths before she asked plaintively, "Harry?"

"Yeah?" asked Harry, cautiously cracking one eye open so that he could look at her.

She tried to swallow, failed utterly, and said, "Stop the room from moving. Please?"

Harry, who was trying to breathe as quietly as he could --so as not to move the bed too much-- blinked his eyes open fully. Forcibly swallowing, more successfully than Ginny, he licked his lips and tried to ignore the painful dryness of his mouth and throat. "I don't think it's the room that's spinning, Gin. I think it's just us."

Ginny, who was looking paler by the second, closed her eyes tightly. "Oh, gods."

"Maybe," suggested Harry, "we could call Madam Pomfrey."

"D'you think she can help?" asked Ginny, sounding both hopeful and doubtful all at once.

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Harry considered it for a moment, thankfully able to ignore how nauseous he felt for those few brief seconds, before answering, "I don't know. Probably, but I can guarantee she'll lecture us about how stupid we were."

Ginny opened her eyes to protest. "We weren't the only ones. Half of Gryffindor..."

"Somehow, I don't think that will stop her."

"If she'll make me feel better - I'm willing to risk it."

Not nodding, since that would only make his head fall off, Harry swallowed very carefully and told her, "I'm going to try and sit up."

He could feel the bed moving beneath him as he pushed himself into a sitting position and, in perfect unison with Ginny, swallowed rapidly and repeatedly. Closing his eyes and breathing deeply, Harry tried not to think about the queasy twists and turns his stomach was making as their private dormitory room pitched and yawed while he sat there.

Ooooooh, this was a bad idea...

"Harry," Ginny whimpered pathetically, "I don't feel so good..."

About to respond, Harry instead found himself trying not to cry out in protest as the curtains surrounding their bed were pulled aside. Sunlight flooded inside and, with malicious accuracy, stabbed into both his and Ginny's eyes like red hot pokers. Clamping his mouth shut and gritting his teeth so tightly they creaked, Harry looked bleakly at their visitor.

It was Hermione. And she looked almost as bad as Harry felt.

"The two of you look even worse than I feel," was the first thing she said, looking over the both of them with slightly red shot eyes. "And that is saying something this morning."

"Do you have to yell?" complained Ginny, one arm thrown across her head and shielding her eyes from the glaring sunlight now streaming onto the bed.

Harry, who was squinting against the light, noticed that Hermione was not standing quite as straight as she usually did. In fact, at second glance, it was apparent that she had a distinct list to one side and was actually swaying slightly as she stood by the side of the bed.

"I'm not yelling," she told Ginny, earning only a baleful glare from the red-haired girl. She looked from Ginny to Harry and, reaching behind her, pulled a floating tea tray into view. Resting on the tray were three glasses full of something thick and green and almost as slimy looking as Snape's hair. Just looking at it, which was unavoidable after Hermione picked up a glass and handed it to him, Harry felt his stomach roll over.

"What are you trying to do?" he asked, trying to hand the glass back. "Make us feel even worse?"

"Don't be childish, Harry," Hermione insisted, pushing his hand and the gelatinous green potion towards his mouth. "Just drink the bloody thing. It'll make you feel a bit better, I promise."

"What is it?" asked Ginny, looking very interested after having heard Hermione's pronouncement. Her interest dimmed somewhat when she got her first look at the potion-filled glass Hermione promptly handed to her.

Hermione hesitated before answering. She shivered slightly and swallowed, as if in memory, and sincerely told them, "Trust me... you do *not* want to know."

Harry looked closely at his friend and, seeing that the front of Hermione's blouse was stained just a bit with what looked like the same green goop that was in the glass he was holding, he decided that she was right and that he probably did not want to know. Eyeing the drink with suspicion and some trepidation, Harry took a deep breath and quickly gulped the contents down.

Oh gods, this was a bad idea.

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It was quite possibly the vilest concoction Harry had ever tasted, making even the Polyjuice and Skele-gro Potions pale in comparison, but somehow he managed not to spit it out. It took a great deal of willpower and determination, but not only did he choke down the entire portion, he also managed to keep it from rising back up and out again. It was a close thing at first, but after several touch and go moments, Harry was surprised to discover his nausea beginning to subside, as well as the pounding in his head and the perpetual spinning of the room.

As his mind grew less murky and coherent thought became less difficult, Harry began to recall some of the broader details of the previous night. There had indeed been a party in Gryffindor Tower, mostly to celebrate the end of the school year, but also a few other things. Such as the great initial and continuing success of Fred and George's joke shop (they had been the ones to supply the students with a crate of Irish fire whiskey - so it was deemed only fair that their business acumen be celebrated as wholeheartedly as everything else).

Unlike the previous year, in which they had almost ended up with negative points thanks to Fred and George's lunatic farewell pranking spree, Gryffindor had managed to win the House Cup. Hufflepuff had come in a close second, surprisingly enough, followed by Ravenclaw and lastly Slytherin. Even though Ravenclaw had won the Quidditch Cup the month before, based on points aggregate (thanks to a tie against Gryffindor and their crushing defeats over Hufflepuff and Slytherin), the reclaiming of the House Cup was --everyone felt-- sufficient cause for a party.

There had also been the much-appreciated news, as reported by Rita Skeeter in the *Daily Prophet* the morning before, that Minister Fudge and several other top Ministry officials had been taken into Auror custody and detained indefinitely. The official inquiry and trial by the Wizengamot was scheduled to commence at the start of the second week of July and testimony from various sources --which no doubt included Harry-- would probably begin a week or so later.

It was this last piece of news, more than anything else, which had finally convinced Hermione to not only turn a blind eye to the party (not to mention the liquor) but actually join in the festivities. This in itself was something of an accomplishment. As she had explained it to the others, ever since suffering her injury Hermione's principal goal for the year had been to bring about Fudge's political demise. Having apparently succeeded, she quite rightly felt that she could be excused for breaking the rules this once.

Looking back it was something of a minor miracle that they had not been caught out in the act by any of the professors. It seemed the Silencing Charms, cast by Harry and Ginny early on, had exceeded all expectations and completely hidden the fact from Professor McGonagall that her students were getting utterly tanked.

Butterbeer, smuggled into the school by methods only the gods knew, had been passed around to just about every student present. The fire whiskey, however, had been restricted to only those in fifth-year and above - mostly because the older students were less willing to share such a prize as they were the more common (not to mention less alcoholic) Butterbeer.

It had been sometime between midnight and one o'clock in the morning that the party's supply of fire whiskey had run dry - prompting Harry and Ginny (at the urging of everybody else) to attempt to find a substitute. At this point Harry's memory of events began to become a bit fuzzy again, no doubt because of the blue stuff, and he decided that he did not really want to remember any more of the details.

"I'm never going to drink again," Harry managed to say once his stomach was no longer heaving dangerously.

"I'm never going to even *look* at a drink again," swore Ginny, having finished her own concoction and grimacing in distaste as she returned the empty glass to the floating tea tray. *~Especially if this is something I have to suffer through the morning after...~*

We're definitely in agreement on that account.

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Hermione looked at them both wryly and said, "It wasn't only the drinking that got us - it was when we started drinking that blue stuff you two conjured up after the fire whiskey ran out. What on earth was it? It certainly had one heck of a kick to it."

****Romulus' ale makes Fire Whiskey seem like water by comparison; even a bad batch,**** announced Heracles, signalling the emergence of the Order members. His voice sounded very amused and a bit smug as he added, ****Last night's batch was definitely a good batch.****

Neither Harry nor Ginny bothered answering, settling instead for having Harry slam shut the proverbial door between their minds and the Order with a reverberating clang. It may have been a completely mental action, but the noise rang through their heads like sharp metal pikes. Still, considering the teasing the Order would undoubtedly subject them to if they were able, it was a small price to pay for some inner peace and quiet. If only for the time being.

Looking around, very slowly as his head still felt less than securely fastened to his neck, Harry asked Hermione, "Where's Ron? I thought he'd be with you."

"Your room is on the way to the sixth-year boys' dormitory," she explained patiently, reminding Harry that he and Ginny were no longer sleeping in the same room they had been for most of the school year. Dumbledore had, using Ginny's anxiety over her O.W.L.s as an excuse, transferred them into a private dormitory the same night that Fudge had tried to have Harry arrested. The suite, much to their surprise, was the one normally set aside for the Head Boy (when the position was held by a Gryffindor). As Daniel Jackson, a Ravenclaw, was this year's Head Boy the rooms had been unoccupied.

When Ginny had remarked on this, Dumbledore's eyes had twinkled in a way that Harry wished he could duplicate and had answered with a succinct, but bemused, "Precisely."

Hermione had by now gathered up Harry and Ginny's empty glasses and set them back on the tea tray next to the remaining glass. She looked at them. "I thought the two of you would likely need as much help as the rest of us. I'll be seeing if Ron's awake now that I'm sure you're not going to throw up your livers."

"Oh, don't say something like that," Harry moaned, feeling his stomach quiver at the thought.

"The room's stopped spinning," said Ginny in a voice filled with amazement as she managed to sit up properly and gaze around their bedroom.

Harry, who had tentatively risen to his feet, suggested, "Then why don't we all get up and go see if Ron's still alive? It's our duty in a way. Misery is supposed to love company, y'know."

Gingerly, as though the bed was planning to unexpectedly launch her into the air, Ginny got to her feet. Together the three friends made their way, slightly unsteadily in Harry and Ginny's case, out the suite and to the staircase. After climbing what felt like far more stairs than usual they arrived at the sixth-year boys' dormitory and entered. Carefully squeezing past Dean, who was sprawled out on the floor - having apparently not reached his bed before passing out, they reached Ron's curtained bed and paused; Harry and Ginny had to catch their breaths; Hermione to carefully arranged the tea tray (which had floated after her) and its sole remaining glass of green slime into a position she could manage more easily.

Even though his head still felt as though it were stuffed full with cotton wool, and the fact that the room still seemed to sway just a bit whenever he moved his eyes, Harry was still lucid enough to pick up on something odd. He frowned as he noticed it and tried to turn his perceptions of magic towards Ron's bed more fully, but found himself unable to focus properly enough to do so.

"That's strange," he settled for saying.

"What is?" asked Hermione, reaching for the curtains surrounding the bed.

Harry looked thoughtfully at the curtains. "I know Ron's magical aura as well as I know yours or Ginny's or my own. What I'm feeling from behind there is definitely *not* Ron."

Hermione frowned as well and began to draw the curtains open as she asked, "But who would be sleeping... in... Ron's... bed..."

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Considering the sight which greeted them, it was not surprising that Hermione trailed off the way she did. It was a sight that would have rendered anybody speechless from shock. Actually, it was a sight more likely to render a person unconscious from shock, but somehow all three managed to stay on their feet and gape stupidly at the occupants of Ron's bed.

Um...

First there was Becky Silver, a pretty seventh-year witch with short, dark hair. Then there was Parvati Patil, who for some reason seemed to be snoring in a manner rather reminiscent of Neville. Lastly, laying comfortably between the two witches, was Colin Creevey - who had such a smile on his sleeping face that it was almost possible to count his molars. All three were still more or less fully clothed, though it was not for lack of trying if appearances were anything to go by.

"Bloody hell!" exclaimed Ginny.

This, quite naturally, managed to disturb the slumbering students. Becky, who was resting her head on Colin's shoulder, shifted fitfully about and mumbled something about idiot younger brothers and the uses of Silencing Charms. Parvati, on Colin's other side, stopped snoring for a moment to tell her sister, Padma, not to use all the hot water in the shower. Then both girls froze in place, clearly registering the fact that they were not alone in the bed.

Colin remained blissfully asleep.

Yes, it was undoubtedly a magnificent morning. The sky was a rich azure blue, while the sunlight bathed everything in a soft golden light. The birds were singing merrily and the screams coming from Gryffindor Tower could be heard throughout the castle.

Breakfast was a muted affair that morning as far as the Gryffindors were concerned. This probably had something to do with the fact that hardly any of the older students were able, or willing, to put in an appearance. Those fifth-, sixth- and seventh-years which did turn up were certainly not in decent enough condition to make any attempt at conversation.

Ron, hugging a toilet bowl and periodically emptying the contents of his stomach into it, had finally been discovered in the bathroom. From what Harry could gather he had spent most of the night, after the party had ended, in that position. Whenever he attempted to leave and go to bed, his stomach reacted violently to the motion and promptly sent him running back to the toilet. Fred and George, had they been present, would doubtless have been inspired by the sight.

As it was, it took Harry the better part of fifteen minutes to pry his friend away from the toilet and back into the dormitory to reclaim his bed from Becky, Colin and Parvati. After that it took them nearly half an hour to convince Ron to take Hermione's hangover cure - which produced mixed results in that it cleared Ron's head, but at the same time cleared the remaining contents of his stomach shortly thereafter.

Taken all together, it was not an auspicious start to the morning.

By the time the intrepid foursome reached the Great Hall Ron's stomach had thankfully settled down, though the young wizard was left looking a pale and uncomplimentary shade of green. It was only the greenish tinge of his face which set him apart from his friends and sister, as Harry, Hermione and Ginny were also paler than usual. Despite this, however, they did look considerably more chipper than the rest of the senior Gryffindors.

Taking his customary seat at the table, Harry barely paid much notice to anything beyond what was immediately in front of him (moving his eyes too much made the world sway uncomfortably) but he was still aware of his housemates and their obvious discomfort.

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Neville was sitting very still, almost like one of the castle's statues, several seats down. It looked almost as if he were still asleep, save for the fact that his eyes, while heavily lidded, were not closed. At his side sat Carmen Ryder, one of Ginny's fifth-year friends, hunched over and leaning heavily against him for support since her body appeared to be boneless (though not literally) and in imminent danger of sliding off the seat and pooling on the floor.

Opposite them sat Seamus, who was staring listlessly at his empty plate and being constantly and loudly harangued by Moira. Apparently she was lecturing the poor boy on the evils of alcohol and its after effects - which Harry thought was a bit odd. He could more or less clearly remember Moira, who was only a third-year, badgering Seamus into sharing some of his Fire Whiskey and later some of his share of Romulus' ale during the party. How she managed to appear not the least bit under the weather was something of a mystery that Harry resolved to discover just in case he ever found himself in a similar situation sometime in the future.

"Post is here," announced Hermione softly as several dozen owls flew into the hall.

"Just the *Daily Prophet*," Harry said while spreading the bare minimum of butter onto the slice of toast he had picked up - he was unsure whether or not his stomach could handle anything more extravagant. Ginny inclined her head, rather than risk nodding. "Yeah, or another subscription. Nobody should be getting actual post on the day we leave. What would be the point, since they'll be seeing their families when we get to King's Cross?"

This pretty much signalled an end to the morning's conversation, aside from Harry's soft request for Hermione to pass the honey, which he then applied to his second, and last, slice of toast. He simply did not have the appetite for more than that. Neither did any of his friends. Ron, who usually ate like a horse, did not even touch any of the food placed on the table though he did drink several goblets' worth of pumpkin juice.

"We should... go back to the tower and start packing," Hermione eventually said, having finally finished sipping her way through the cup of coffee she had been drinking. She looked decidedly unenthusiastic about the idea, even though she was the one suggesting it. She checked her watch and said, "The Express will be leaving in a couple of hours."

"Does that involve standing up? And walking?" asked Ron, his face still a bit green.

"Yes," answered a reluctant Ginny.

"Uuuhn," Ron groaned, closing his eyes and very carefully dropping his head to the table. "Then just leave me here. I'll spend the summer at school."

Harry, who had been the first to stand up after Hermione's announcement, grabbed Ron by the arm and hoisted him up. Feeling a bit more fortified now that he had eaten something, he managed to grin and urge his friend, "Come on."

"Ahem."

The quartet had just been leaving the table when Professor McGonagall had approached and caught their attention. Looking particularly stern this morning she peered keenly at them from over the rims of her rectangular glasses and enquired, "Dare I ask what exactly is going on? Why have half of my senior Gryffindors not come down for breakfast?"

"Don't ask," Harry answered, not so fortified that he thought himself capable of explaining what had happened the previous night to his head of house. He shook his head. "If we told you, you'd have to

take away so many points; Gryffindor would be in negative figures for the rest of the century. Maybe the next as well."

"And if it's at all possible... please don't shout so loudly?" pleaded Ron, who was looking as though the castle walls had collapsed on top of him.

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"I see..." said McGonagall, looking from one student to the other. Her expression grew even sterner (if possible) as she raked them with a penetrating stare of disapproval and, perhaps, just the tiniest bit of sympathetic amusement. "Very well then. If there's nothing else, I will see the four of you again at the start of next term."

The four Gryffindors nodded and continued on their way, but were stopped once again.

"And I trust this morning's... situation... will not be repeated," McGonagall said to their retreating backs, her voice making it clear that if the situation were to be repeated, the consequences would be most dire. And she was not referring to the following morning's hangover.

"Trust us," Ginny assured her fervently, "it won't."

Walking out the Great Hall and back towards the tower, Ron groaned once they were well out of McGonagall's earshot. "That went well."

Hermione looked at him wryly. "Speak for yourself."

"I just did."

"Please don't," she pleaded, "I'm really not feeling up to having an argument this morning."

"That's good. Neither am I."

Harry laughed quietly and added, "You can add me and Gin to that list as well."

"Come on," insisted Ginny, picking up the pace a little. She looked back at the other three and explained her haste, "The sooner we get packed, the sooner we can get to the station, board the train, find a compartment and close our eyes again."

"Let's go!" exclaimed Ron, eagerly increasing his steps until he had passed Ginny, leaving the others to catch up.

"I thought you said not to shout," observed Hermione as they strode down the corridor.

"Only for unimportant things," he told her. "And going back to sleep is more important than anything else to me right now."

Hermione arched an eyebrow and looked pointedly at him before saying sarcastically, "Thanks, I feel so much better hearing you say that."

It took several seconds before Ron realised his mistake.

"Aw, crud."

"Anything off the trolley, dears?" asked the smiling old witch on the Hogwarts Express, who had been going up and down the train, selling her wares, since time immemorial (if Sirius' and Remus' tales were to be believed).

"A couple of Chocolate Frogs, please," Harry told her, rising from his seat next to Ginny and going up to the trolley. He looked over the assorted snacks and sweets arrayed there and looked over his shoulder at Ron and Hermione to ask, "You two want anything?"

Hermione looked up from the massive tome she was reading, *Every Spell, Curse, Hex and Charm Ever Written, Spoken and Otherwise From the Beginning of Time Through Till Next Week Tuesday*, and smiled gratefully. "A Cauldron Cake would be nice, thanks."

Ron, who had been slouched next to his girlfriend for the entire train ride thus far, cracked one eye open and shook his head fractionally as he declined. "Nothing."

"You sure?" asked Harry.

"I'm still not hungry."

"Suit yourself."

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"Here you go, young man," said the trolley lady, handing Harry the two Chocolate Frogs and one Cauldron Cake.

Harry accepted the sweets and paid her the required Sickles and Knuts. He smiled his thanks as she closed the door to their compartment and moved on. Returning to his seat next to Ginny he handed her one of the Frogs before leaning across to give Hermione her Cake.

"Ugh, I'm getting sick just thinking about you lot eating, let alone me," said Ron, who was still feeling the after-effects of the previous night's drinking. For some reason he had not recovered as quickly as his friends and sister. He groaned and closed his eye, leaning his head back and telling them, "I'm going back to sleep. Wake me up when we get to King's Cross."

"Then I guess you're not interested in getting Ptolemy?" asked Ginny, who had just opened her Chocolate Frog and had a look at the card which came with it.

Ron cracked his eye open again and asked in confusion, "Eh?"

Harry, leaning close to Ginny so that he could see the card, nodded as he reminded Ron, "The Chocolate Frog Card? You've been looking for Ptolemy and Agrippa for years now, since before I met you, remember?"

Who on earth would want a card of that bore Ptolemy? Osiris' voice spoke up, sounding amazed by the idea.

Young Ronald, from the look of things.

Is the boy daft? Osiris asked incredulously. ***A card of Ptolemy of all people?***

~Oh, be quiet, you lot,~ interrupted Ginny silently, sharing a bemused look with Harry. They both knew how the Order, and Osiris in particular, could be sometimes. ~That's my brother you're talking

about after all.~

Osiris was reluctant to let the subject pass. **Perhaps, but still... Ptolemy?**

Ron sat up straighter and repeated, "Ptolemy?"

"Here," said Harry, taking the card from Ginny and handing it to Ron. He chuckled when his friend held the card up and looked at it, clearly not quite able to comprehend the fact that something he had been searching for for years had so unexpectedly fallen into his lap. Harry slung his arm around Ginny's shoulders as they watched Ron blink repeatedly and stare at the card, Hermione looking on fondly from his side.

"Ptolemy?"

Their arrival at King's Cross was heralded by a thick layer of pewter grey clouds that had settled low over London. Harry, noticing the change in the weather as the train passed the city limits, had dug into his trunk and extracted his trench robe. The black dragon hide would easily shrug off any rain or sleet that might start falling.

"Wonderful start to the summer," grumbled Ron as he rooted through the contents of his trunk, also in search of something warmer to put on.

"It's not that bad," Harry placated mildly. "At least at The Burrow I'm reasonably guaranteed that I won't be shot the moment I step through the front door."

He grimaced just a bit at the memory of walking into the kitchen at number four Privet Drive, exactly one year ago, and finding himself on the wrong end of a gun barrel. His recollection of what followed was still little more than a blur, but that single instant when Uncle Vernon had pulled the trigger was indelibly etched in Harry's memory.

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Since that rather traumatic experience, the Ministry had re-evaluated the prudence of leaving the famous Boy-Who-Lived under the so-called guardianship of the Dursley family. Regardless of whatever blood bond might have existed between Harry and his Aunt Petunia, the sanctity of that bond had been broken when Vernon had tried to kill Harry.

As a result --based on reports from several prominent Aurors, a petition drafted by Arthur Weasley and almost every Ministry official that had been present, as well as Dumbledore's recommendation-- Harry would now be staying at The Burrow until he came of age (which was only one month away). Of course, there had been some opposition --mostly from that sycophant Minister Fudge-- until a team of Unspeakables, from the Department of Mysteries, had given The Burrow an all clear.

Harry still felt a small swell of pride when he thought about the complex series of protective wards he had placed around The Burrow. They were still his finest spell workings to date, which was understandable considering how he deeply he felt for the family he now considered his own. While it was in his power, Harry had no intention of allowing his presence in their home to jeopardise the safety of the Weasleys. After adding the latest additions (which he had devised over the past year) even Hogwarts would seem an easier nut to crack by comparison.

"No, but you might just get hexed," warned Ginny playfully.

Harry looked at her curiously and asked, "Why d'you say that?"

Ginny's smile was a smug one as she told her, "You're my boyfriend."

"What's that have to do with it?" Harry asked, thoroughly confused. The fact that he and Ginny were as close as they were (which was close) was not something he was likely to ever forget. And how that relationship might endanger him... *Ah, I think I know where you're going.*

"I have six older brothers, remember?" Ginny told him, still smiling. Silently she confirmed his deduction, *~Six highly over protective brothers~*

"It's rather hard to forget," admitted Harry.

"You're forgetting, Ginny," Hermione pointed out, "Harry here isn't scared of your brothers."

Harry looked at her incredulous and asked, "Are you joking? I'm positively terrified... of Fred and George."

Ron rolled his eyes and protested, "You're their business partner and principle investor. You gave them *one thousand* bloody Galleons, for Merlin's sake! They won't touch you."

"I wouldn't be so sure of that."

"They didn't do anything last summer," said Ginny, reminding Harry of what had been the best two months of his life (if you excluded the part where Vernon had shot him). She frowned in puzzlement, when she noticed he was shaking his head, and asked, "Why do you think these holidays will be different?"

"Look out the window," Harry answered dryly.

His three companions exchanged bewildered looks before leaning against the window and peering out at the platform. There, dressed in lurid green dragon hide jackets, were Fred and George - both engaged in a seemingly enthusiastic conversation with Blaise Zabini. Standing in front of the twins, her arms crossed over her chest and head tilted to one side, Blaise was listening to them with what looked like bemused approval.

Hermione summed up the scene best, saying succinctly, "Oh dear."

"I can't believe that a Slytherin's got a crush on not one, but two, of my brothers and I'm not doing anything about it," moaned Ron, as he turned away from the window and fixed Harry with a stare that made it seem as if it were his fault that the most beautiful witch at Hogwarts was infatuated with his siblings.

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"As if you could," replied Ginny. She watched through the window for a few extra moments before

turning to Harry and stating, "I don't see what the problem is."

"I think do," stated Hermione, clearly trying to stifle a grin.

Harry motioned where Blaise, Fred and George were still deep in conversation. "It looks like Blaise has gained herself some new friends," he explained patiently. "And we can all imagine how that is going to turn out. Three lunatics to worry about instead of just the two... and the third bringing with her a healthy dose of Slytherin guile."

"Well, Harry," said Ron, clapping him on the shoulder. "All I can say is that Zabini was always your problem, the twins became your problem when you gave them your winnings, and now the three of them are still your problem."

"Yes," Ginny nodded, gesturing at her trunk with Harry's wand and levitating it into the air so that she could manoeuvre it through the door and out their compartment into the passage. "I think we can all agree that it's safest to leave them in your capable hands."

Harry watched as Ron and Hermione followed in Ginny's footsteps, leaving him alone in the compartment. He looked around and finally settled his gaze on Hedwig, who had been let out of her cage and was perched on one of the luggage rack. Seeing that he was apparently looking at her for guidance, the snowy owl bobbed her head and hooted encouragingly. He shook his head and sighed, "I'm doomed."

~Come on, love,~ Ginny's thoughts called to him from outside the train, on the platform, *~the family's waiting for us.~*

Using his talent for wandless magic to lift his trunk, Harry made his way outside to join his friends, family and loved on. Stepping of the train and onto Platform Nine and Three-Quarters, he silently repeated, *I'm doomed.*

"Oh, stop being a pessimist," Ginny told him, smacking him lightly on the arm as he came to where she had been waiting for him.

"Pessimists are what optimists call realists."

"Come on, Harry," she playfully chided him, slipping her arm around his waist and leading him to where Ron and Hermione were arranging their trunks on the trolleys the twins had secured for them to use. She hugged herself close to him, pressing comfortably up against him, and asked, "After the year we've had... what could possibly go wrong?"

"With our luck," he answered, "we'll soon be finding out."

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30. Tomorrow's Interlude

The Ashes. Nobody in the quaint village of Badger's Drift knew the reason why the house was named so. Many years ago it had been called something else altogether, under the auspices of its previous owners, but that had changed when one particular black-haired young man and one feisty red-haired young woman had moved in.

It had been the talk of the village for months; somebody finally taking possession of the old house, which had stood abandoned for so many years at the end of the hollow. Some of the older folk considered the house cursed, but they seldom spoke of their reasons for thinking such. The house and surrounding area quickly earned a reputation of being a place where peculiar things happened at the oddest times - though that was par for the course in most Midsomer villages.

Despite their home's idiosyncrasies, the young couple that lived there were well liked by the people of Badger's Drift, and even in some of the neighbouring villages. While not grossly rich, they seemed quite well off and were not afraid to pay handsomely for quality work. They were not in the habit of throwing lavish parties, but everyone was welcome to drop by for some tea and biscuits if they were around. And if something odd might happen, well, nobody was perfect.

What nobody in Badger's Drift realized, however, was that all the little incidents they thought a bit unusual were actually quite normal. In fact, they were such natural occurrences that neither the young couple nor their closest friends and family considered them the least bit odd. The reason for this disparity was a simple one, really.

The Ashes was home to a wizard and a witch.

A very, very, famous wizard and witch.

At the moment it had been a quiet and unremarkable day in Badger's Drift. On the outskirts of the village, a fifteen minute walk from the main road, the Ashes sat serenely under a late afternoon, summer sky. The sun was intermittently peeking out from behind the drifting clouds, casting its light over the surrounding countryside. Filtered by the branches and leaves of the oak and holly trees in the garden, the sunlight streamed through a kitchen window and gave Ginny's hair a fiery glow.

She was in the process of making herself a cup of coffee, her second since arriving home an hour ago. The rich aroma of a special Turkish blend Harry had bought for her last birthday wafted up from the mug and filled the room. Cradling the steaming mug in her hands, it felt nice and warm against her skin, she lifted it up and took a sip. Nice and hot.

A familiar tingle ran down her spine, one that had nothing to do with the coffee. Someone had just Apparated straight through the Anti-Apparation wards that encompassed the house and garden. Not to mention bypassing the dozens of assorted perimeter and security charms which kept the Ashes free of any unwelcome guests. Since Harry was the only person, other than herself, able to accomplish such a feat, Ginny did not get up, but instead waited for him to join her in the kitchen.

"Hullo, love," Harry greeted as he came through the door, having finished depositing his trench robe in the Ashes' entrance hall where he had Apparated.

"Good afternoon, Harry," she replied happily, tilting her head back to receive a kiss as he passed behind her before sitting in the chair next to her. "I put some tea on for you," she said, indicating the teapot on the tabletop.

~You read my mind, Gin~ he told her through their bond, smiling as he removed the slender frames of his glasses and slipped them into his shirt pocket. He waved his hand at the teapot and had it pour him a cuppa, which then drifted lazily through the air to him.

Ginny grinned at him, *Always*.

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The pair sat in comfortable silence for several minutes, content simply with each other's presence.

Ginny watched fondly as Harry blew gently on his tea, which had just a hint of mint mixed in, before he sipped from the cup. Nobody knew where Harry had acquired his taste for mint tea, for whenever someone asked he simply remained silent and continued sipping his tea with a mysterious smile that the Mona Lisa would be envious of.

"Did you confirm our use of the Great Hall for tonight?" Harry asked out loud after a while.

"Yes," Ginny nodded, placing her half-finished coffee down on the table. She settled back in her chair and continued, "The summer holidays began a week ago, so there aren't any students at the castle right now. She doesn't have any problem with us using the hall, although she did say that she would prefer if we leave it in the condition we find it."

"I don't think that will be a problem," he declared, sipping on his tea and looking at her with a twinkle in his eyes that Dumbledore would have been proud of.

****Yes, your problems are usually far messier.****

****At least the big ones are,**** agreed Heracles, voice laced with bemusement. ****He still causes wonderful amounts of mayhem and chaos without even trying.****

****D'you remember that time--****

Ahem, interrupted Ginny, taking a swallow of her coffee. *Would you please cut that out?*

"So, how many cups is that?" asked Harry teasingly. "I know you're fortifying yourself before we leave."

"It's only my second cup," she replied defensively, before admitting, "since getting home."

Harry raised his eyebrows and said, "That's quite a cutback. I was expecting it to be your sixth or seventh, at least."

Ginny scowled playfully. "Harry."

"Come on, love," he said, finishing his tea in several deep gulps. He checked his wristwatch, the one she had given him for Christmas many years before and observed, "We'll have to go now if we want to get to Hogwarts early."

Finishing her coffee as well, she put her mug down next his empty teacup when she stood. As they briskly walked from the kitchen out into the Ashes' entrance hall the cup and mug rose into the air and floated to the sink, where the tap turned itself on, and proceeded to give themselves a good cleaning. In the entrance hall Ginny was searching for her house keys when she said, "Y'know, we've been preparing to go on this trip for what seems like forever. Now that it's finally here - I'm not ready for it."

"Tell me about it," agreed Harry, looking through the cupboard they used to store their cloaks and outdoor robes in. He looked over his shoulder at her and grinned, "Still, if I remember correctly, it's going to be fun."

****Fun? Are you daft?****

****Centaur, merpeople, vampires, goblin mercenaries--**** recited Alexander, before being interrupted by Loki.

****And don't forget that bloody arsehole Malfoy...****

Harry chuckled and retorted easily, *~I think it'll be a bit less stressful when observed from another perspective.~*

Osiris sounded very reluctant to agree. ****Could be, but we doubt it.****

"Aren't you going to put on your trench robe?" asked Ginny. Harry paused in his perusal of the cupboard and looked pointedly at her. She returned the look with one of puzzlement for several seconds before blinking in realization and admitting, "Ah, yes. I'd forgotten."

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"I think this will do," he decided, pulling on an ordinary midnight blue travelling robe, with two fine lines of red trim.

Slipping into her own travel robe, she asked, "Do we have enough money?"

"I stopped at Gringotts on my way home," Harry assured her, pointing at a money bag sitting on the small table by the front door. "Fifty Galleons should be enough for our wardrobe and necessities while we're there."

"Shall we be off then?" she asked, picking up the bag and tossing it to him.

He caught the bag and safely deposited in his robe's inside pocket. He grinned and politely waved her on, "After you,"

With a soft pop, like a large soap bubble bursting, Harry and Ginny disappeared.

With a soft pop, like a large soap bubble bursting, Harry and Ginny appeared in front of the massive wrought-iron gates that guarded the route leading onto Hogwarts' grounds. With the power of the Order backing them they could have easily Apparated straight through the castle wards, as they had done many times before, but on this occasion they preferred to arrive in a more sedate fashion. As the world seemed to blossom into existence around him, Harry saw that he and Ginny were not the

only ones who had arrived earlier for the meeting. Standing on the other side of the gates, having only just passed through them a few moments earlier, stood a familiar figure.

"Blaise!" he said merrily, striding forward to engulf the short-haired blonde witch in a friendly hug.

When they parted his friend looked at him with her crystal blue eyes narrowed in suspicion.

"Somehow I get the impression that I'm about to be talked into doing something utterly insane, yet again," she drawled sarcastically, but with a smile.

Harry grinned and nodded in agreement. "The usual."

Blaise mock-groaned and rolled her eyes. "Oh, joy."

After exchanging the usual pleasantries they started walking up to the castle. The sun was dipping low over the horizon, the sky awash with pinks, reds, oranges and yellows. Long shadows stretched out from the great oak trees of the Whispering Woods, the successor to what had once been the Forbidden Forest - which had been ravaged beyond recovery by the Well of Shadows and subsequent battle against Voldemort.

As the three trudged up the well-worn path, Blaise enquired, "So, what lunacy d'you have planned for us this time?"

"Uh uh, Blaise," Harry playfully rebuked, wagging a finger at her. "Not until the others have arrived."

****Not that she, or any of the others, will believe you when you do tell them.****

****If you're not careful they might lock you in a padded cell at St. Jerome's.****

Blaise sighed, but was apparently content to wait, though still asked, "Who's coming?"

"Practically everyone," answered Ginny with a grin.

"Well, I know George and Fred are coming. And you'd never do anything without Ron and

Hermione," mused Blaise, considering. She mulled over the subject. "Who else?"

Ginny began ticking off on her fingers. "Mum and Dad will be here too."

"Sirius and Remus," added Harry. "Dumbledore and Professor McGonagall."

"Moirra."

Blaise shook her head. "George wasn't sure she could make it."

Harry only shrugged. "We'll have to wait and see."

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"Otherwise, that's everyone," concluded Ginny, dropping her hands and wrapping one arm around Harry's waist as they walked.

They were about halfway up the path when a loud crack sounded in front of them, followed by an ecstatic cry of, "Harry Potter sir!!"

Harry heard Ginny suppress a groan and release her hold on him when they drew to a stop. As he took several steps forward, waiting for Dobby to run up and engulf his knees in the inevitable hug, she muttered under her breath, "Here we go again."

"Harry Potter brought his Misses Giny too!"

****It's scary the way he always greets these two.****

****I know,**** agreed Romulus. ****Not even the most servile house-elves are as eager as this one.****

Gently prying Dobby off his legs, Harry could hear Blaise behind him quietly ask, "Doesn't he ever quit?"

His lips twitched at Ginny's reply. "Are you kidding?"

"Dobby is so pleased that Harry Potter has come to visit Hogwarts," bubbled Dobby, bouncing up and down like a five year-old on Christmas morning.

"It's good to see you again, Dobby. How are you these days?"

"Dobby is working happy at Hogwarts, Harry Potter sir," Dobby told him, grinning rapturously at the fact that his idol was taking an interest in his well-being.

"That's good to hear," Harry allowed, smiling at the house-elf's enthusiasm. He looked past Dobby towards the castle and said, "We're having a meeting this evening in the Great Hall, that's why we're here. D'you know if anyone else has arrived before us?"

Dobby nodded so eagerly his head was in danger of shooting off. "Just Master Dumbledore, Harry Potter sir."

Harry smiled. "Ah. Thanks, Dobby."

"It is always Dobby's honour to help Harry Potter, Harry Potter sir," Dobby told him seriously, before vanishing with an echoing crack.

"Oh, be quiet you two," said Harry as Blaise and Ginny stepped up from behind him and they resumed their walk up to the castle.

"We didn't say a thing!" protested Ginny, trying to look a picture of innocence.

Harry looked at her sceptically. "Right."

"Y'know, Harry," suggested Blaise with a mischievous grin, "maybe you should just have Dobby come work and at the Ashes for you."

~Oh, he'd love that~ agreed Ginny.

"I'm not sure I could survive the experience," replied Harry. He looked at the two witches and reminded them, "You remember all the trouble I had in our second year."

Blaise's grin grew broader. "Yeah, Malfoy spent months trying to find out who hexed that Bludger to chase you. He would've had a seizure if he ever found out."

Ginny chuckled and added, ~Plus there's the fact Hermione would go nuts.~

****If she thought you were using Dobby without paying him, and you know he wouldn't accept payment from you, Harry,**** agreed Merlin, ****she might actually try to hex the two of you.****

Not only that, but can you think of a way to explain a house-elf bringing out a tray of tea and crumpets when the neighbours come to visit? asked Harry, picturing such a scene and the utter chaos that would

doubtless ensue.

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It might be worth it, just to see the looks on their faces.

Poor Muggles.

By now they could see the front doors leading into the Entrance Hall and make out two figures standing in wait. The one was most likely Professor McGonagall, while there could be no doubt as to the other's identity. After all, who else but Dumbledore had such a silvery beard, not to mention the bright turquoise robes?

"Ah, Harry, Virginia, Blaise," Dumbledore greeted them when they had finally reached the front steps and begun climbing them to the entrance. "It is good to see you here, this fine night."

"Likewise, sir," Blaise returned.

"Please, dear girl--" Dumbledore waved a dismissive hand "-- call me Albus."

Blaise looked at the old wizard uncertainly, as most younger witches and wizards did when he asked that they address him by name. "Uh... yes, sir."

Harry grinned at Blaise, remembering his own apprehension and discomfort when Dumbledore had done the same to him, shortly before the start of his fifth year at Hogwarts. Fortunately, unlike most others, Harry had got over it within a matter of days. Turning his attention away from his friend and to the man who was his first mentor, he looked Dumbledore up and down before asking, "Foregoing the wheelchair today, Albus?"

"I find the cane lends one an air of dignity, don't you?" answered Dumbledore, indicating the elaborate gold and cherry wood staff that he was supporting himself with.

"You very seldom seem anything but dignified," Harry countered.

"True, but a little bit extra never hurts."

Ginny looked wryly at Dumbledore and said, "Aside from cheesecake and fire whiskey, yes."

"Harry, Ginny," said McGonagall, stepping forward. Her face was set in the usual stern look that terrified the first-years, but with just the hint of an affection smile. Once sure she had their attention she arched an eyebrow and stated, "I trust that whatever you have planned isn't going to cause too much damage to the Great Hall."

"Why do they always assume we're going to blow something up?" Harry asked Ginny, sounding a bit affronted by the implication.

Er... because you always do?

Before Harry could argue with Heracles, Dumbledore coughed politely and said pretty much the same thing, much to Harry's dismay. "Probably because you've done just that on more than one occasion, Harry."

"I always put everything back together exactly the way it was!" Harry protested. "Even that time I blew up the entire castle!"

"Not *exactly* the way it was, Harry," observed Blaise, waving a hand to encompass the entire castle.

"Hogwarts is a thousand years old," he defended himself. "It needed renovating."

McGonagall wryly suggested, "Perhaps, though in future maybe a less drastic approach might be called for."

"You don't have to worry about that, Minerva," Ginny assured her. She looked to Harry, whose jaw was beginning to fix itself in a firm line. Reaching out again, she slipped her arm around his waist and pulled him close to her. "We're never going through a situation like that again."

"Come on," said Harry, in a slightly clipped voice, as he and Ginny stepped through the great doors and into the Entrance Hall, "the others will be here soon."

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Half an hour later almost everyone had arrived, save Ron and Angelina. As Fred and George had explained, Moira was unavailable until the next week, due to the fact that she was currently touring through Italy. Ron, on the other hand, was simply late as usual, something Harry and Ginny had already taken into account when arranging the time of the meeting.

Arthur and Molly Weasley were chatting with Sirius Black and Remus Lupin, who had arrived not long after Harry, Ginny and Blaise. The four were discussing a recently submitted bill that, if the Ministry passed it, would allow werewolves and other so-called dark creatures to become Aurors.

While it was a number of years too late for Remus, it was a great step forward against one of the Wizarding World's oldest prejudices.

On the other side of the staff room, where they had congregated while waiting for everyone to arrive, Fred and George had engaged Blaise in a lively and animated explanation of their latest invention. With the white Muggle lab coats they wore during their experiments, combined with what appeared to be a Static Charm on their hair gone wrong, the twins were the very picture of two stereotypical mad scientists. In contrast, Blaise, who was listening with tolerant bemusement to their wild tale, could have passed for a dapper executive in the upper echelons of a high profile company. Truth be told, both impressions were rather accurate portraits of the twins and blonde witch.

"I believe it is the agreed upon time," announced Dumbledore, who was sitting in his customary chair with McGonagall and Hermione on either side. Hermione, who had arrived with Arthur and Molly, was holding her tea in her right hand and was absently twirling her wand in her left.

Ginny, who had been quietly talking to Harry, looked around. "Ron's late."

Harry smiled wryly. "Must have got lost in London again."

"Hopeless," declared Blaise, with a roll of her eyes.

Ah, I believe this is him now, remarked Sun Tzu, as a familiar aura intruded into Ginny's range of

perception.

That man is going to be late for his own funeral.

I wish I had been.

Come to think of it, so do I.

At this point Ron burst into the staff room, almost hanging from the doorframe as he tried to catch his breath, and gasped out, "It's not my fault!"

"Really? And how's that, dear?" asked Hermione, raising her teacup to hide a smile.

"This map's complete gibberish! I can't make heads or tails of it!" Ron explained, holding up a crumpled sheet of paper and waving it about.

George joined his flustered younger brother by the door and looked mournfully at him. "Ron, maps of the London Underground are colour coded so that you always know where you are. It's impossible to get lost in it - *Fred and I* can't even manage to get lost in it."

Ron held the map under George's nose. "Look at this map and tell me that again."

"I really don't see the problem," said Fred, looking over George's shoulder.

"It's a Muggle photocopy," explained Ron impatiently. "It's in black and white!"

"We'll get you some crayons."

Ron's face was fast approaching the same shade of red as his hair, which Ginny knew meant that an explosion was imminent, when Arthur Weasley stepped forward. Putting a hand on each of the twin's shoulders he pulled them away from Ron and calmly told them, "Don't tease your brother, boys."

"Come on, Dad," pleaded George, making a show of clasping his hands together and dropping to his knees in mock supplication. "We hardly get to see our ickle Ronniekins these days. We have to take full advantage of any occasion that presents itself."

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Molly stomped up to the kneeling wizard and used one of his ears to pull him to his feet before starting to berate him, "Fred Weasley--"

Fred, who taken several cautious steps back, interrupted, "Oi, he's not Fred! I am!"

"Don't try my patience as well, George!" snapped Molly, letting go of George so that she could round on Fred and impale him with her infamous glare.

"Actually, Molly, he *is* Fred," Blaise pointed out as George staggered over to stand next to her, rubbing his ear ruefully.

"Oh," Molly blinked, halted just before she could work herself up properly. After a quick apology to Fred, she turned her attention back to the first twin. "George Weasley--"

George draped an arm around Blaise's shoulders, ignoring his mother, and remarked dryly, "Thank you so much, dear."

Blaise kissed him on the cheek. "My pleasure, luv."

"Come on you lot, enough goofing off," said Harry, rising from his seat. He extended a hand to help Ginny up as he told them, "We're here on serious business."

As if you wouldn't goof off if given the chance, teased Loki.

Not right now, we wouldn't, Ginny told him sternly. Taking Harry's hand she stood up and started walking to the door. "Let's go. We'll be needing the Great Hall for this."

"Are you going to tell us what this is all about, Harry?" asked Sirius, coming up behind Harry and Ginny, as the group filed out of the staff room and began walking towards the Great Hall.

Harry's godfather had recently grown a goatee, primarily because he was too lazy to shave properly everyday. This, together with the short ponytail he wore his shoulder length hair in, gave Sirius the appearance of a man several years younger than he really was. The roguish grin that seemed permanently etched across his face only enhanced the effect.

Harry smiled fondly and told him, "Patience, Sirius, patience."

"You're expecting Padfoot here to be patient?" asked Remus, walking alongside Sirius. His short, steel-grey hair gleamed in the torchlight when he shook his head, "Really, Harry, you should know better than that after all these years."

"Hope springs eternal, Remus," Ginny told him.

"So what's going on?" asked Sirius again.

"We'll explain when we get there."

Blaise, who was walking together with George, noted, "You know, Harry, before I got to know you better; I would've considered meeting like this very odd."

Harry laughed. "That's what I've always liked about you, Professor, you're so undeniably levelheaded."

"D'you have to keep calling me that?" asked Blaise with obvious exasperation.

"But it's your title, Professor," teased Ginny, joining in on what was an old joke.

"One year! One year!" exclaimed Blaise as they entered the school's Trophy Room. "I was the Defence Against the Dark Arts professor for only *one* year!"

George was grinning as he hugged her to him. "Yes, love, but you were also the first of our generation to do so."

"Besides," Ron added, "everyone is Defence Against the Dark Arts professor for only one year."

"Except for Harry and Ginny here," Remus pointed out. "They've never applied for the position."

Harry smirked knowingly. "I wouldn't be too sure of that, Moony."

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"What do you mean, Harry?" asked McGonagall, who had been listening to their banter.

"You'll find out in a minute or two," answered Ginny, smirking wryly herself.

By now they had passed through the Trophy Room and were walking down the next to last corridor leading to the Great Hall. They progressed quietly for the most part, until Sirius broke the silence.

"Are we there yet?"

Having finally arrived at the Great Hall, and somehow managing not to hex Sirius along the way, Harry stood alongside Ginny as everyone waited patiently (and in one or two cases impatiently) for them to explain.

"Well? Are you going to tell us what we're here for?"

"In a minute, Sirius," Harry told him, before turning to Dumbledore, "but before that we'll be needing the letter I asked you to write yesterday, Albus."

"Of course," Dumbledore agreed with a nod. He reached into his turquoise robes and drew out a sealed letter which he handed to Harry. "I am curious though, Harry, why you would need a letter of recommendation for both you and Virginia. Your exploits over the years, the both of you, are almost legendary. Nobody in the wizarding world would hesitate to employ either of you."

Ginny chuckled wryly. "They will where we're going."

"Going? Where're you going? You're leaving now? Is this why you called us?"

"Yes, Sirius, we're leaving now," confirmed Harry patiently, "but it's not a question of *where* we're going."

"What d'you mean, Harry?" asked Hermione.

"Harry and I have some unfinished business to take care of," Ginny explained. "We've known about it for quite a while, but we've only recently reached the point where we can set about tying up the various loose ends we left dangling."

"What are you talking about, dear?" Molly asked, visibly concerned. Even after so many years she was still wary of her children taking on a task they might not be able to cope with. "Are you and Harry in trouble of some sort?"

Osiris snorted in amusement and asked, **When are you two not in trouble?**

Never?

~Your opinions are appreciated~ Ginny all but growled, *~but could you let us get on with it in peace?*

"We're not in trouble *now*, Molly," Harry told her. He smiled at the thought. "That's what we have to go and take care of."

"You're starting to sound like Dumbledore, Potter," commented Blaise. It took her nearly a second before she remembered that Dumbledore just so happened to be standing next to her. Blushing red enough to match any Weasley she stammered and apology, "Oh crap. Sorry, sir, I--"

"No need, Blaise," he assured her. "I agree with you - our young couple are being rather obtuse."

Harry looked at Ginny and arched an eyebrow. *Was that a compliment or an insult?*

~A bit of both I'd say~

Then I think we should take it as a compliment.

Ginny passed it off by explaining, "It's a talent we've been practicing."

Harry nodded. "Like Snape practices being a stuck up bastard."

"He practices?" asked a suddenly goggle eyed Fred.

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"In front of a mirror?" asked George almost immediately after, a demented grin spreading over his face at the thought.

It was quite a surprise when he let that slip.

Could've knocked us over with a quill.

"Honestly, you two," huffed Hermione. "Could we please stick to the topic at hand?"

Harry chuckled. "Ever the voice of reason, Hermione."

Hermione nodded. "Somebody has to be."

"In that case; allow us to present our latest accomplishment," announced Ginny with a flourish, successfully catching everyone's attention. "The product of countless hours of in depth research and hard work over the years."

Harry reached into his robes and, with an equal flourish, withdrew and displayed the object of his and Ginny's labour. He held it out for all to see as he began a running commentary.

"An elegant, stylish, not to mention durable finish. Ergonomically designed controls and display.

Twelve and twenty-four hour functionality. Programmable calendar. Built in AM/FM radio, with automatic station tuning," he said, pointing out each feature as he went. "And --I'm really proud of this-- a snooze button!"

"Um... Harry?" asked Hermione sceptically. "Muggles have had electric alarm clocks for quite a while already..."

He looked at her and arched an eyebrow in the most sardonic expression he could muster. "I'm pretty sure they don't have any that can be programmed to transport the users back to a preset date and time."

Wait for it. Wait for it.

They're going to blow their tops just like Vesuvius.

"What?!" barked Sirius, staring at Harry and Ginny in disbelief.

"You're saying this is some kind of time-turner?" asked Remus.

"Hardly anything that simplistic," replied Ginny, taking the compact alarm from Harry and pressing on the various buttons that adorned it. Her voice was filled with no small amount of satisfaction and pride as she said, "This is a work of art in the field of temporal magic. It compares to time-turners as the space shuttle does to paper aeroplanes."

"You're joking!" exclaimed Ron incredulously. "What the bloody hell did you make something like this for?"

"We made it, because we had to," Harry answered, "because we had already made it."

Careful, cautioned Osiris, **or you'll give them, and us, a headache.**

And why, might I ask, he replied, *shouldn't they be as confused as we were?*

McGonagall stepped forward, shaking her head in what must have been an attempt to comprehend what was being discussed. "What the devil are you going on about, Potter? Why do you need to use the Great Hall for this?"

Ginny looked up from the alarm, which she was still programming, and said, "You'll understand in a few minutes, hopefully."

"Then we can get to the tedious task of explaining all the unanswered questions that have accumulated over the years," added Harry, keeping careful watch on both Ginny and the others present in the hall.

"Ah. I believe I understand," Dumbledore declared with a look of comprehension.

"Albus?" McGonagall looked at the former headmaster.

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Hermione, who was looking pale all of a sudden, stumbled forward. "You - you're planning on going back in time, aren't you?"

"Five points to Gryffindor, Hermione," said Blaise sarcastically. "I thought it was obvious. After all, why build a... whatever you want to call it, if you don't intend to use it?"

"Five points to Gryffindor?" repeated Harry with a grin. "Those old teaching habits die slowly, don't they, Professor?"

Now Sirius stepped forward. "This is insane! Harry--"

It probably is. Was. Will be. Whatever.

Molly Weasley joined him, but focused her daughter instead of Harry. "Don't you even think about contemplating this, Virginia--"

A couple of decades too late for that.

Ignoring Blaise's comment, Hermione continued, "Harry! Ginny! Listen to reason, you can't--"

"We always listen to reason," Ginny told them all, cutting off their protests. She grinned impishly. "It's mostly a question of who's yelling the loudest at the time."

"Ginny..."

"Relax, Dad," she told her father, who was approaching the situation with far more calm than his wife. Only looking up from the alarm clock for an instant she met his gaze and said, "We're going from Hogwarts straight to Hogwarts and back. What could possibly go wrong that didn't already go wrong?"

"Would you like a list?" asked Blaise.

I don't think there's enough parchment in the castle for one that long.

Now or then.

"That's another one of your good points, Blaise," Harry told her. "You're such an optimist."

"The date and time are set," Ginny declared as the alarm began to beep. Holding it in one hand she slid her free arm around Harry's waist.

Harry waved goodbye to their friends and family, saying cheekily, "If we're not back in ten minutes, please feel free to panic."

Ginny grinned. "Be seeing you."

With a thunderous crack Harry and Ginny vanished in a flash of light that left spots in the eyes of those remaining.

The group of astonished witches and wizards stood silently in their places, staring at the now vacant spot where Harry and Ginny had been standing only a moment before.

"So, Blaise," Ron spoke up after nearly a minute had passed in silence, "how're my niece and nephews doing?"

"Terrible," Blaise deadpanned. She shot a look at George, who was still gaping at where Harry and Ginny had disappeared. Rolling her eyes she nodded at him and explained to Ron, "They all take after their father, unfortunately."

This shook George out of his stupor and he looked fondly at her. "Really? Some might say they're smaller versions of you, dear."

Fred, who was standing by his parents, shook his head ruefully. "Ooooh, you're going to pay for that one, brother mine."

"Our sister-in-law deserves it," Ron countered on George's behalf.

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"I suppose I do," agreed Blaise amiably. She shook her head and sighed, "Those children of ours *are* unholy terrors, I'm sorry to say."

"As their mother shouldn't you be defending them as being 'little angels'?" asked Fred, looking at her curiously.

"I'll have you remember that, 'Unca Fwed'," Blaise replied dryly, "the next time they set your wife's hair on fire."

Fred swallowed and tried to laugh. "Heh heh, Ang would not be happy if that happened again."

Hermione nodded her agreement. "She would probably quit work so that she'd have enough time to give you a thorough hiding."

Ron laughed. "At least Fred doesn't have to worry about Angelina beating him to a pulp with a Beater's Bat. Neville was telling me, last time I saw him, that Moira had chased him around their house with one after he invited her cousin Angus to dinner."

"Yeah," agreed George, delighted over his twin's discomfort, "Angie prefers the age-old tradition of grabbing whatever she can reach and throwing it at him. She still has a great aim."

"As if Blaise hasn't ever thrown things at you, George?"

"Actually," interrupted Sirius, who had been watching with a gleam in his dark blue eyes, "I had the good fortune to stop by one day for a visit, which happened to coincide with a little spat they were having at the time."

Remus, who had been looking thoughtfully at where Harry and Ginny had been standing, looked up and asked curiously, "What did she do to him?"

George swallowed nervously, "Er, Sirius..."

"I chased him out the front door," answered Blaise, with a devilish grin, "hitting him over the head with his broom."

"Not the Thunderbolt!" protested Fred and Ron together, both apparently more concerned with the broom Blaise had used than their brother's health.

"Blaise, dear, d'you think that was wise?" asked Molly, trying to sound as if she disapproved, but unable to hide the mirth bubbling in her eyes.

Dumbledore, who was watching the proceedings with amusement, leaned close to McGonagall and whispered to her, "Aren't you glad, Minerva, that we no longer have to teach them?"

"Quite right, Albus," the headmistress agreed. She shook her head ruefully. "They certainly haven't matured much over the years."

"If anything, I think they've grown more childish than they were," observed Hermione, who was closest to them and have been able to overhear.

"Oh really, Hermione," drawled George in a fair imitation of his wife. "And what, pray tell, do you do when Ron ticks you off?"

Fred, exhibiting the twin's usual quicksilver loyalty to their brothers, rounded on Ron with a cackle.

"Yes, Ronniekins, what weapon does our dear Hermione favour?"

Blaise looked curiously at Hermione and asked, "Let me guess, you hit him over the head with a copy of *Hogwarts, a History*?"

"No, I have much better ways of letting Ron know I'm upset with him..."

Further discussion was brought to a halt when another flash, accompanied by another crack of thunder, encompassed the Great Hall. Blinking away the spots caused by the brilliant light, the group found themselves gaping at the two figures now standing in their midst.

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Gregory Proteus shook his head in an attempt to ward off the mild dizziness that assaulted him in the moment everything changed from then to now. He looked across at his wife, Hilary, who was standing opposite him, one hand clasping his own and the other keeping hold of the alarm clock that had brought them here. Her bright hazel eyes were slightly glazed as she too fought down the effects of their journey.

"Finally," he said.

"Glad to be back, hmm?" Hilary asked, releasing his hand and reaching up to brush a stray lock of her shoulder length blonde hair out of her eyes.

Gregory smiled wryly. "Unquestionably. Time travel always gives me a headache."

Hilary was instantly concerned and asked, "D'you need to see a Healer?"

"Not the actual travelling, love, the concept. Tomorrow's yesterday and yesterday's tomorrow and everything's so incredibly predictable," he said, waving her worries aside as he slung his arm over her shoulders. Together they turned to face the seemingly dumbstruck witches and wizards that had witnessed their arrival.

****At last!* exclaimed Osiris with obvious relief. *That was an unnerving experience.****

****Oh hush, Osiris,* said Merlin. *We knew we would lose our connection to them during their displacement.****

****Knowing and experiencing are completely different things.****

"Gods, it's them," Ron breathed, sounding scarcely able to believe what his eyes were seeing before him. He gestured dumbly at them as he muttered, "The Defence professors from our sixth year. The barmy ones."

Blaise nodded as she too recognised them, calling them by the names they had long ago told their students to use. "Professor Hilary and Professor Gregory."

"Yeah, them. The Proteins."

"Proteuses, you twit," corrected Fred, not taking his eyes off the two newcomers. "Honestly, George and I didn't even have them as teachers, but we remember their names."

"I've always said Ron has the memory of a goldfish," added George.

~Your brothers never fail to amaze me, love.~

The twins? How's that?

~Despite what's just happened; they can't resist teasing Ron.~

"Harry, Virginia," Dumbledore greeted, limping forward, "welcome back."

"It was like we never left, Albus," they chimed.

McGonagall clutched a hand to her chest in surprise and gasped, "Oh my."

Sirius shook his head so forcefully that his hair escaped from its ponytail, looking very much like an oversized Grim trying to shake his coat free of water. He stared at them, switching his attention from the one to the other so quickly his head was almost a blur. "Harry? Ginny?"

"You were those crazy Defence professors everyone kept talking about?" asked Remus in incredulous disbelief. "You taught yourselves?"

Gregory gave them all a familiar grin and nodded. "Interesting paradox, don't you think?"

Fred and George shared a look. "Wicked."

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~*Finally*~ Harry silently told his wife, running a hand through his currently mahogany hair and using his wandless magic to return it to its natural black. Feeling a now familiar prickling sensation all over his scalp he resisted the urge to scratch furiously as he stated, ~*That damn hair dye was making my head itch something terrible.*~

At least you weren't bothered by the contact lenses, replied Ginny, using some wandless magic of her own to shed her disguise. Her golden curls shimmered, darkening and smoothing out into deep auburn tresses as she deftly flicked the specially coloured lenses out of her eyes.

****It is, was, ill fortune that you were unable to use any of the Glamour magicks to alter your appearances,**** commiserated Isis.

~*Too risky,*~ Harry told her as he removed his own contact lenses. ~*Our younger selves might have noticed if we had.*~

"It was you, wasn't it?" asked Hermione, though in truth it was more a statement than a question. She stumbled towards them as Harry put on his glasses, the plain glass lenses muting the brightness of his eyes just a fraction. "You're the ones that convinced my parents to let me stay at Hogwarts!"

Harry smiled ruefully and confessed, "It took days to get the taste of that Polyjuice Potion out of my mouth."

"Still, it was worth it," Ginny said resolutely. "Somebody had to talk some sense into them. You're our friend; we couldn't very well let you get pulled out of school now, could we?"

Hermione crossed the short distance in an instant, latching her arms around them both and crushing them to her in a fierce hug.

"Thank you, both. So much," she whispered when she finally released them, visibly trying to hold back her tears as she stepped back into Ron's waiting arms.

"This is crazier than anything I was expected," admitted Blaise.

"I can't believe you actually did that!" accused Sirius, waving his hands angrily. "Do you have any idea how dangerous that was? Do you?"

"I'm afraid I must agree with Black," concurred McGonagall, given them both a stern look that had not been directed their way since they had left Hogwarts. She arched a disapproving eyebrow and said, "You especially, Harry, should know the risks involved with time travel. After that incident with the time-turner..."

Dumbledore, who had conjured up a cosy chair to rest in while they had been waiting, smoothly interrupted her. "This situation is a trifle different from what happened in Harry's third year, Minerva."

"Perhaps so, but it was still incredibly foolhardy," said Arthur, shaking his head worriedly. "If the Ministry ever found out..."

"They won't, Dad. Now that we've done what we've had to, we're going to destroy the clock," Ginny assured them all. She held up the alarm clock, which looked exceedingly innocent despite what they knew of its true purpose, and caused it to disappear in a swirl of light and sparks. "Since we didn't make any notes or plans, nobody will be able to duplicate it."

****Aside from any future holders of the Order,**** added Alexander conditionally.

****Should they require it,**** agreed Miko.

Ginny repressed a grimace. *Let's hope they never do.*

"But why did you do it?" asked Remus insistently. "Any kind of interference in past events could lead to catastrophe."

"All things being equal, I would normally agree," Harry said a touch dryly, "but things were definitely *not* equal that particular year. Far from it."

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McGonagall cleared her throat and suggested, "I think it would be best if we finished this discussion over dinner."

Hermione, still in Ron's arms, nodded in agreement. "Definitely, headmistress."

"Yes, we'd better have something to eat now before Ginny and I start explaining," Harry said in his usual good humour. He glanced sidelong at his Godfather as the group, some more reluctantly than others, began to leave the hall. "I know how Sirius gets at times like these."

"Don't we all," agreed Fred and George.

"What do you mean 'how I get'?!"

The dinner, as par for the course at Hogwarts, was a sumptuous feast that left all those who partook in it well sated. For a change the meal had not been served at the staff table, where guests to the castle traditionally dined during visits, but rather in Professor McGonagall's private quarters.

After the main course had been finished desert was served by the headmistress' personal house-elf, an ancient and wizened creature that wore a miniature butler's uniform and insisted that everyone call him Alfred. Until then discussion at the table, which the former Transfiguration professor had magically extended to accommodate all her guests, had revolved mostly around the more mundane events of their everyday lives.

Now, as Harry helped himself to his second serving of chocolate cake, liberally drenched in whipped cream, the conversation turned the matter at hand.

"You knew," accused Ron, with only a hint of spite. Taking a gulp of his after dinner coffee he continued, "You knew everything that was going to happen. Everything that entire year, and afterwards as well."

"The Well of Shadows. Draco. You knew he was going to go on a rampage that first night in your

PDA class," said Hermione, unconsciously rubbing her left hand over her right arm and shoulder.

"It was PFT at the time," corrected Harry calmly.

"You let it happen," Ron ground out unhappily. "You just sat back and let--"

Ginny interrupted him, "And let things happen the way they were supposed to happen. The way they did happen."

Dumbledore, sitting next to McGonagall, cleared his throat. "Perhaps, Harry, Ginny, you should start at the beginning."

"That might be a bit of a problem, Albus," Harry told him with a faint smile of wry amusement.

"How's that, Harry, dear?" asked Molly, putting aside her strawberry cheesecake.

"Predestination Paradoxes tend not to have beginnings, Mum," explained Ginny patiently. She gave the matter a moment's thought and added, "Or ends for that matter."

"Could you repeat that in English for the rest of us, please?" asked Ron, clearly exasperated and not liking it. Though he had mellowed greatly over the years, thanks mostly to his wife's influence, he still had little patience to spare when he would prefer to get to the heart of a matter.

As Hermione, who had some experience in this matter, explained the concept to Ron, Harry listened to Joan say, **Explaining zis eez going to take zome time.**

Fortunately time is something we have in abundance at the moment.

McGonagall suddenly looked at Harry and Ginny with a narrow expression. "So that's why the Proteuses --you-- were always baiting Severus about the Quidditch results. Making bets. You already knew how the games were going to play out."

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"I don't know about anyone else," Harry said with a grin, "but I've been waiting for decades to get revenge on that slimy git."

"Especially after how he treated us during in my sixth year," agreed Ginny.

"And does introducing Crabbe and Goyle to opera count as revenge?" Blaise asked dryly as she sipped at her sherry. She arched an eyebrow at them, "Those two kept half of Slytherin up during the nights, practicing."

Harry was barely able to prevent his grin from growing even wider. Somehow he managed to affect an innocent expression and shrug offhandedly. "We may have mentioned the subject in passing after one of our classes."

Ginny chuckled and added, "You have to admit, Blaise, that they've improved over the years."

"It would be hard not to improve," countered Blaise. "They started out with bawdy sea shanties for pity's sake."

"At least it made the Halloween cabaret interesting that year."

"Pixies," Hermione suddenly said, drawing everyone's attention to her.

"Excuse me?" asked Ron, thoroughly bewildered.

"No wonder you set those pixies loose on us in your first class," Hermione said, looking at Harry with an incredulous expression. "You were taking a page out of Lockhart's book, weren't you?"

Harry laughed and shook his head. "The expressions on your faces..."

Ginny's silent laughter echoed through his mind as she almost choked on her coffee as the memory, which was certainly fresher in her and Harry's thoughts than in Hermione's. After all, for them it had been less than a year. *~If only we could've taken a photograph of it.~*

"But why did you go back to that year?" asked Sirius, leaning forward and nearly knocking over Remus' cup of hot chocolate. He shook his head in confusion and went on, "Why not a couple of years earlier and prevent Riddle from rising again in the first place? Or why not a year later? You know how hard things were then. If you had helped fend off that first attack--"

"We had a different mission, Sirius," interrupted Harry. He did not like to dwell on the events of what was supposed to have been his seventh year at Hogwarts. "One that was more important and with far reaching consequences."

"We played the part history cast for us. Nothing more," elaborated Ginny.

"The centaurs," said Ron, snapping his fingers in comprehension. "You're the ones that talked them into helping us during the battle after you tried to disperse the Well. And the merpeople as well."

Hermione blinked and then turned to look at them in surprise. "The merpeople? Circe, so that's why you were damp when you came into the Hospital Wing after Harry's fight with those shadow dragons that Christmas. You'd been in the lake, talking to the merpeople."

"And here I thought they'd been shagging in the shower," laughed Blaise.

"Blaise!" exclaimed Molly.

"Oops. Sorry, Mum," she instantly apologised, not wanting to risk her mother-in-law's wrath. She had seen her husband and Fred on the receiving end of that far too often.

"So that's why you went back," concluded Arthur thoughtfully, "to help turn the tide in the battle against Riddle after you had successfully dispersed the Well of Shadows."

"Not quite, Dad," corrected Ginny.

Harry explained. "Our primary goal was to ensure Draco Malfoy survived the experience."

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"The book on Hogwarts' wards that Hermione found," elaborated Ginny, turning to look at her longtime friend and grasp her hands in her own. "The one by Calvin Hobbes? We planted it in the library for you to find."

"The information in it was tailored to modify the dispersion. Took us years to work out the process ourselves, even with the Order's help," finished Harry.

Ron looked as if they had both just declared their undying love for Snape. "But why the hell would

you want to do that?"

Dumbledore, who had been keeping quiet and simply listening, spoke up. "I'm sure, Ronald, that you should be able to work that out for yourself."

"What d'you..." Ron trailed off and his eyes grew wide. "Merlin's beard."

"You sneaky bastard, Potter," said Blaise, looking at him in admiration. She understood the pivotal role Draco had played in the final act of that particular drama, perhaps better than most of those sitting at the table. Only she, Harry, Ginny and Hermione knew the exact details of what had happened that night.

"Thank you," acknowledged Harry politely. He took a bite of his cake before looking across the table at Hermione. "There were other things we had to take care of as well."

Ginny nodded in confirmation and explained, "Besides making sure your parents let you stay at Hogwarts, we suggested that our younger selves help train you to use your left arm."

"We knew it would be nearly eight years before we could brew that particular Restorative Draft. You needed something to distract you from dwelling on it - and learning how to use your left arm was the best thing."

"Yes, I'd forgotten that," mused Hermione thoughtfully, staring into space as she remembered those difficult days following her injury. "It was also one of the reasons I began studying wandless magic over that summer, again with your help. It was almost a lost art until you began teaching it to me."

"And see where that led to," Harry prompted.

"I had always thought having a class devoted to wandless magic would have been a boon to Hogwarts," agreed Dumbledore. He smiled at Hermione and raised his glass of Coke (his latest vice from the Muggle world) as a salute. "The last seven years have proved me correct in that regard."

McGonagall nodded in agreement. "I had much the same thought when Hermione proposed the idea of her Wandless Spellcasting course at the end of her tenure as Defence Against the Dark Arts professor."

"It's certainly the most popular elective offered," asserted Blaise.

Ginny turned from Hermione, who was starting to blush from the attention directed at her, and looked at her brother. "And Ron's habit of jumping from one idea to the next has saved our rear ends on more than one occasion over the years. Thinking outside the box is a useful skill."

"Not to mention suggesting that Practical Fighting Techniques be kept going, even after we had left school," added Harry.

"Y'know, I've always preferred that name," admitted Ron wistfully, thinking back to his school days.

"Practical Defence Application just doesn't sound as much fun."

"I believe that is why the school governors decided to change its name," said Dumbledore.

"It still has a good record of attendance, even after all these years," Hermione told them happily. "The only activity the students get even more excited over is Quidditch."

"Although it was quite a bit more popular when Mr Potter was teaching it," admitted McGonagall.

Fred laughed. "Harry definitely has an... interesting... teaching style."

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George shook his head and groaned, "Don't remind me. I still can't forget that first night when he 'volunteered' us for use in his demonstration."

"I seem to recall the results of that night as well, Mssrs Weasley," McGonagall reminded them both, her eyes narrowing fractionally behind her rectangular spectacles. Being turned on by two of her students in the middle of the inaugural Practical Fighting Techniques demonstration duel was not something she was ever likely to forget.

"Uh... we did apologise for that, remember?"

"Why don't I remember any of this?" asked Dumbledore suddenly, looking at Harry and Ginny with an intense curiosity.

"Pardon, Albus?" Molly asked, confused by the former headmaster's question.

"I remember the events as they took place perfectly well, Molly. However I have no recollection whatsoever that Gregory and Hilary Proteus were Harry and Ginny Potter," he explained.

"Why should you? They were in disguise," said Ron.

Blaise rolled her eyes. "Ron, you twit, the letter."

"Quite so, Blaise," Dumbledore agreed. He explained, "I recall you having a glowing letter of recommendation, though the details escape me. I presume that was the same letter I gave you this very evening?"

"We used this," said Harry, reaching into his robes. He drew out a stylish pair of sunglasses and deposited them on the tabletop for all to see.

"Omniacles?" asked Fred, recognising them as one of Weasley's Wizard Wheezes' most successful products.

Ginny nodded and told them, "We modified them with a Memory Charm, specifically targeting Albus' knowledge of our real identities."

Dumbledore cautiously picked up the Omniacles and examined them. "Ah, quite ingenious."

"We were worried sick when we had to use them," Ginny told him.

"Not to worry, my dear, it was well worth the risk," the old wizard waved aside her concerns. He looked at the group assembled around the table and said, "Not to slight anyone's accomplishments, but Gregory and Hilary Proteus were two of the most successful and popular Defence professors I ever had an opportunity to work with. I cannot blame them for wanting, needing even, to keep their true identities secret until now."

"That I must agree with, even though they did have a propensity for practical jokes," agreed

McGonagall, looking sternly at Harry and Ginny as she did. For some reason she then turned her gaze to Fred and George, clearly remembering that they too had not let their position as the Defence professor prevent them from wreaking havoc throughout the school. She often said that she suspected the twins had only applied for the post (in different years thankfully) as part of a marketing campaign to advertise their wares to the students. Doubtless to say, Defence had been a *very* popular subject during their tenure.

Seeing that the neither pair were not looking the least bit repentant she turned her attention back to Dumbledore and said, "I remember asking you, when you retired, if you knew how to contact them." George looked at her curiously and asked, "You actually consider them good enough to ask them back?"

McGonagall gave a brisk nod. "Without a doubt."

"In fact," interjected Sirius, "I think Remus here is the only one to ever return to the post, even if there was a year break in between."

"I have asked him on several occasions, but he has always refused," McGonagall told him.

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Remus smiled and shook his head. "I enjoy teaching, but these days I prefer my research work at Stonehaven."

"That's a pity, you were--"

"Wait!" exclaimed George, rising from his seat with a demented grin.

"Wait!" exclaimed Fred, also getting to his feet with an identical grin.

George clapped his hands together. "Wait!"

Fred was almost bouncing where he stood. "Wait!"

"We're waiting." Blaise observed dryly.

"You tried to get the Proteuses back to teach Defence again, right?" Fred asked McGonagall, rounding on her and making a show of pretending to be a high priced barrister questioning a star witness.

"I believe I confirmed that a while ago, Mr Weasley."

"You two *are* the Proteuses, right?" asked George, mimicking his brother perfectly as he turned to where Harry and Ginny were sitting.

~Harry, I don't like that look in their eyes~ Ginny told him, eyeing her brother with a touch of nervousness. Only the Gods, Fred and George knew what scheme they were hatching.

Neither do I, Harry admitted.

Oh ho, this is going to be good, chuckled Osiris.

Fred and George caught each others eye and beamed.

"That solves everything!"

"What are you talking about, Fred, George?" asked Molly, quite confused.

Arthur looked at his wife sceptically and asked, "You really want to know?"

Fred looked at McGonagall. "You want the Proteuses to teach Defence Against the Dark Arts."

"Harry and Ginny are the Proteuses," continued George.

"So why aren't you signing them up already?" asked Fred, waving his hands between the two and McGonagall.

Harry looked at Ginny. *I had a feeling they were going to suggest this.*

~Well, it's not the worst job in the world~ she confessed thoughtfully. *~In fact, I rather enjoyed that year~*

So did I.

"That's actually a very good suggestion," admitted McGonagall, apparently surprised that it was Fred and George that had come up with it. She began to eye Harry and Ginny with the same calculating look that Harry remembered from his first year, when she had pulled him out of his first flying lesson and deposited him in Oliver Wood's hands. Clearly her throat she observed offhandedly, "Professor Riggs scared most of the students half to death this past year."

"Oh, Ginny dear, Harry, it would be wonderful if you took the post," cried Molly, looking positively delighted at the idea.

Hermione was grinning at them both from across the table. "Even if only one of you teaches Defence, the other can always take over the PDA classes."

Ron was also grinned, though for a completely different reason. "Just think of Snape's reaction when he finds out."

"Cor," breathed George, his eyes glazing over as he pictured such a scene.

"You have to do it," Fred pleaded, "if only for that."

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Harry shared a look with his wife, whose bright brown eyes were sparkling with mirth. He held out a hand and asked, "Gin?"

"Harry?" she asked in return, taking his hand and signalling their agreement. Having come to an accord they turned to see everyone watching and waiting expectantly.

"Why not?" they chorused.

Fred and George pumped their fists into the air and yelled, "Excellent!"

Blaise leaned forward, to offer her congratulations. As Harry, then Ginny, shook her hand she asked, "Does this mean you'll stop calling me Professor now? After all, you were teaching over a decade before I was."

"No. *We* weren't teaching," Ginny denied, "it was the Proteuses."

"Which gives me an idea," said Harry. He looked at his former professor and asked, "Minerva, would you object to us making an entrance similar to our last one?"

"I don't suppose so," McGonagall agreed after some cautious consideration.
"You're thinking of giving Snape an aneurysm, aren't you?" asked Ginny, grinning at the thought.
"How d'you think he'll react?" asked Harry wickedly. "Discovering that the dreaded Proteuses are returning Hogwarts, only to have them suddenly reveal their true identities?"
Ron, looking at them with an awed expression, exclaimed, "He's going to go crazy!"
"At the very least," agreed Hermione, also breaking into a grin.
"You intend for me to keep your appointment to the position a secret from Severus?" asked Minerva, realizing what Harry had in mind.
Fred quickly corrected her. "Not a secret, Headmistress,"
George grinned evilly. "A surprise."
Everyone began to discuss and place bets on Snape's possible reaction to learning that Harry and Ginny would be teaching Defence Against the Dark Arts the next term. Dumbledore, who was watching the proceedings with a benevolent and grandfatherly smile, leaned close to Harry and Ginny.
"I gather the discussion about your time travelling adventure is over?"
"For the time being, yes," agreed Harry, watching as his friends and family. "After all, everything worked out all right in the end."
*** Fin ***